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## TROUBLED BELONGING IN OFFLINE AND ONLINE SPACES: THE CASE OF POLISH MUSLIMS\*

### INTRODUCTION

The need to feel a sense of belonging—defined as the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need (Allen et al. 2021). The concept of “troubled belonging” refers to a form of cognitive dissonance characterized by contradictions between beliefs or assumptions and lived experiences (Kenyon 2019). It signifies a liminal state between formal membership and subjective othering, resulting in an experience of being caught in between (Kofoed, Stenner 2017). Troubled belonging is inherently relational, and is articulated through narratives that act as both mediators and enablers of this condition (Bieger 2015).

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The notion of troubled belonging, debated extensively in studies on migration, citizenship, and minorities, has gained renewed significance with the emergence of global mediascapes (Ponzanesi 2019). This article explores the troubled belonging of Polish Muslims in both offline and online spaces. Polish society, culturally and historically dominated by Catholicism, often perceives Muslims as outsiders or not fitting in (Pędziwiatr 2010). Polish Muslims have found themselves in the eye of the cyclone, subjected to an intense, media-amplified politics of fear (Zielińska, Pasamonik 2021). Muslims in Poland, though not numerous, exhibit significant internal diversity in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language, and origin, resulting in a fragmented and dispersed Polish ummah.

The term “Polish Muslims” is inherently ambiguous and can be understood differently depending on the context in which it is used. In this article, however, “Polish Muslims” are defined broadly as Muslim individuals who are connected to Polish culture and Polishness as such. This group includes people born in Poland, whether as descendants of earlier immigrants who have been Muslim from birth or as converts to Islam. It also encompasses immigrants whose main center of life is Poland and who potentially envisage their future in the country. Furthermore, the study includes Polish citizens temporarily residing abroad who, through familial and social ties (maintained primarily via online communication), remain strongly connected to Polish society. This broad definition allows for a more inclusive analysis of troubled belonging, recognizing the diversity and complexity of those who constitute the Polish ummah.

This study aims to investigate the two interconnected spheres—offline and online—and the two social contexts—of non-Muslim mainstream society and of the Polish ummah. Central to this paper is understanding how Polish Muslims navigate their position within a predominantly non-Muslim society and within Muslim religious circles. The article begins with an introduction to key concepts—trust and belonging—and a comprehensive literature review. The subsequent section details the data and methodology employed in the study, which utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of the DIGITISLAM project. Following this, the analysis focuses on the troubled belonging of Polish Muslims in relation to mainstream society and the Polish ummah, examining both offline and online spaces. Through this approach, the study aims to unravel the complexities and challenges that some Muslims experience in Poland.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust plays a fundamental role in the formation of communities and societies. In literature, it is often emphasized that trust forms the foundation of key social values such as reciprocity, solidarity, social order, and democracy (Schilke, Reimann, Cook 2021). Niklas Luhmann (1979) noted that trust reduces the complexity of the social world, allowing individuals to function within complex systems without the need to fully understand every aspect of them. Although trust may not be the most rational strategy in the short term, as it exposes an individual's interests to potential risk, it is widely present in society. It helps reduce uncertainty in interpersonal relationships, which in turn enables more effective cooperation and social development.

Two basic types of trust are distinguished: generalized trust and particularized trust. Generalized trust refers to the social level and involves large groups of people who often do not know each other personally. It is the basic trust in other members of society that enables people to function within common norms and institutions. Particularized trust, on the other hand, refers to a small group of people who know each other personally and share common experiences (Schilke, Reimann, Cook 2021). Generalized trust, although initially studied by psychologists as a personality trait, quickly became a focus of interest among sociologists and political scientists, who began to analyze it at cultural and national levels. Among the most frequently studied determinants of generalized trust are race and the ethnic diversity of the community in which an individual operates (Dinesen, Sønderskov 2015; Ziller 2015). Religion and the frequency of religious practices are additional factors influencing the development of trust in society that are frequently studied (Thunström et al. 2021). National and regional-cultural differences also play a vital role in understanding how different societies build and maintain trust (Simpson 2006).

Combined with social trust, a sense of belonging is integral to the formation of cohesive communities. Belonging is a fundamental human need that underpins the cohesion of communities and the well-being of individuals (Mellor et al. 2008; Allen et al. 2021). It arises when people feel valued, accepted, and integrated into a group, shaping their sense of identity and purpose (Claridge 2020). This concept is closely tied to social support, as individuals' feelings of belonging often depend on the degree of emotional, material, or spiritual assistance they receive from others. For example, in religious congregations, the extent to which members provide

support significantly influences an individual's sense of connection and inclusion within the group (Allen et al. 2021).

A shared social identity further strengthens the sense of belonging by fostering trust and cooperation among individuals. When people perceive themselves as part of a common "in-group," they are more likely to support and rely on one another, reinforcing social bonds (Claridge 2020). This dynamic is particularly important in fostering cohesion within diverse or marginalized communities, where a strong shared identity can help bridge differences and promote mutual understanding (Tyrberg 2024). However, for groups often perceived as "other," such as Muslims in many societal contexts (Pędziwiatr 2010), the challenges of exclusion and marginalization complicate this process, making it even more crucial to understand the interplay between belonging and social trust.

The dynamics between minority groups and mainstream society are frequently analyzed through the lens of belonging. The situation of Muslim minorities exemplifies an intersectional framework that integrates dimensions of ethnicity, citizenship, race, and religion. The discourse surrounding Muslim identity and belonging in Western contexts gained prominence post-9/11 (Ewing 2008), prompting various stakeholders to question the extent to which Muslims integrate into Western societies and whether they pose a threat (Abu El-Haj, Bonet 2011). This narrative challenges the fundamental aspects of Muslim belonging, potentially leading to national deidentification, manifested as a distancing from mainstream society (Maliepaard, Verkuyten 2017), marginalization, or even the risk of radicalization (Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015). For well-integrated Muslims from middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, this scrutiny engenders a persistent sense of having their cultural identity and loyalty questioned, compelling them to continuously demonstrate their belonging (Slootman, Duyvendak 2016). Aarset (2018) introduces the concept of conditional belonging, which underscores the ongoing efforts of Muslims in Norway to attain and sustain their social status. This concept also highlights the inherent fragility and awareness of the conditional nature of their belonging, which remains beyond their control.

The issue of troubled belonging among Muslims in Europe is less frequently examined from an in-group perspective. Where such studies are conducted, they predominantly focus on in-group favoritism (Balliet, De Dreu 2014; Hunter et al. 2017). This trend can be attributed to the demographic composition of Muslims in many Western European countries, where the majority are of migrant origin and often belong to a dominant ethnic group (e.g., Muslims of Turkish descent in Germany,

Muslims of Maghrebi descent in France). Tensions typically arise between groups of different origins, particularly between converts and Muslims of migrant backgrounds. These debates and the associated troubled sense of belonging often center on issues of religious authenticity and legitimacy (Rogozen-Soltar 2012; Özyürek 2015). Additionally, they may reflect transnational political practices and conflicts within European host countries, such as the case of Turks and Kurds (Lyon, Uçarer 2001; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001).

The literature review predominantly focuses on the context of Western European societies. However, the interplay of nationality, religion, and identity in Poland operates under somewhat different premises for several reasons. First, the local Muslim population is relatively small, not exceeding 0.5% of the total population. Consequently, Muslims are scarcely visible in public spaces, and many Poles have never encountered a Muslim directly. Second, views on Islam and Muslims in Poland are markedly negative, both in absolute terms and in comparison to Western European countries. According to a Pew Research Center study (2019), 66% of Poles hold a negative opinion of Muslims in their country, compared to 18% of Britons and 42% of Spaniards. Third, Poland is home to autochthonous Muslims, specifically the Tatars, who have been living on Polish soil for over 600 years. They are considered an ethnic minority and are often referred to as the “good” Polish Muslims (Pędziwiatr 2011). These three characteristics provide a distinct framework for analyzing the troubled sense of belonging among Muslims in Poland.

#### DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study uses both primary and secondary data to offer a comprehensive perspective. The primary data comprises quantitative results from a survey and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with Polish Muslims. The survey data elucidates trends in trust among the Muslims who took part in it; these trends indirectly reflect aspects of belonging. The interviews provide in-depth personal narratives of the participants’ experiences. Secondary data is used to contextualize the analysis, offering background information on social and demographic factors.

Data for this study was gathered through an online survey over a five-month period, from November 2023 to March 2024. The survey tool comprised 27 questions of varying complexity, ranging from basic demographic inquiries to more in-depth reflections on religious experience, and

was designed to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey link was disseminated via multiple Polish Muslim Facebook groups, allowing participants to self-select into the study. In total, 75 questionnaires were returned, although 31 were excluded from the final dataset due to incomplete or insufficient information. The demographic profile of the respondents revealed that 32 were women, 6 were men, 1 identified as “other,” and 5 did not provide any information regarding gender. This distribution may reflect both the gender composition of the aforementioned forums and the generally higher propensity of women to participate in studies of this kind. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 73 years old.

The second part of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews, conducted between November 2023 and October 2024, providing a more nuanced understanding of Polish Muslims’ experiences. A total of 33 interviews were completed with 25 women aged 19 to 70 and 8 men aged 25 to 63. The researchers aimed to reach as large and diverse a group of Muslims as possible. Although women ultimately constituted a clear majority of the participants, limiting their number solely to achieve gender parity would have been unjustified in this context. Each session lasted approximately one hour. Specifically, the interviews addressed topics such as participants’ online activity, their involvement in group discussions, reasons for disengaging from those groups, perceptions of a distinct “Polish Muslim internet,” and the interplay between online and offline contacts. This approach enabled a rich and comprehensive exploration of how Polish Muslims, especially those who took part in the interviews, interact and create community in both digital and real-world spaces.

Both the survey and the interviews were conducted as part of the DIGITISLAM project, which encompassed a broader range of themes beyond the concept of “troubled belonging.” This wider thematic scope not only allowed the collection of data from individuals who might otherwise have refrained from participating in a study narrowly focused on exclusion, but also ensured the inclusion of perspectives from respondents who did not necessarily perceive themselves as marginalized. Consequently, the resulting dataset offers a more comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of the Polish Muslim community’s experiences than may otherwise have been achieved.

#### POLISH MUSLIMS WITHIN MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

One of the most significant factors contributing to the negative perception and therefore exclusion of Muslims from Polish society is the

fear of Islam, regularly fueled by the media since the 2000s. The media, often taking advantage of the power of negative emotion, portray these groups on a continuum from cultural threat to terrorist risk (Cap 2017). This kind of narrative often causes general society to view Islam through the lens of danger, which significantly affects relationships between Muslims and the rest of Polish society.

These negative attitudes are reflected in research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) in 2019, according to which as many as 45% of Poles have a negative attitude toward Muslims, making them the most disliked religious group in Poland. Additionally, 38% of respondents believe that a conflict between Islamic and Western cultures is inevitable, and that finding common ground is impossible. It should also be noted that stereotypical and harmful beliefs about Islam and its followers are widespread in Polish society. As many as 63% of Poles perceive Muslims as mostly intolerant toward customs and values different from their own, while 61% believe that Islam encourages the use of violence more than other religions. Furthermore, 25% of the respondents to the CBOS research think that the majority of Muslims do not condemn terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic fundamentalists (CBOS 2019).

Many Polish Muslims feel ill at ease with these negative sentiments, which is reflected in the data. Muslims living in Poland were asked to rate their trust in people in general on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 standing for “I don’t trust people at all,” and 10 for “I trust people completely.” The average score was 4.46, with a standard deviation of 2.17, which shows that most respondents exhibit significant caution when interacting with others. This result is notably lower than the average in Polish society as a whole, because, according to a study conducted by the Institute of Finance in 2023, as many as 47% of Poles expressed trust in people they encounter daily (Obłąkowska, Bartak 2023). In contrast, among the respondents of the project-specific survey described in the methodology, only 31% gave such a response. The results were not higher with regard to people known to the respondents: as many as 49% admitted that they did not trust the people living in their neighborhood. In comparison, according to research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) in 2020, only 14% of the general Polish population declared a lack of trust in their neighbors.

The data from the interviews provides more insights into the sense of exclusion. One of the respondents—Anna, a 23-year-old student—summarized this with the following words:

*“Nobody wants to lose their relationship with their parents, with their family, it’s just that we [Muslims] are being attacked from the other side, from the family. We are being talked down to, being told that we are stupid, that we are brainwashed, that we do not know what we are doing, that we are going to be carted away. [...] And I know people who have genuinely lost contact with their family, the family has simply moved away.”*

Managing fragile relations with non-Muslim family members and having to prove oneself are lived experiences of many of the respondents and indicative of Polish female converts to Islam (Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. 2023). As a counterbalance, the same respondent—Anna—said that she created a dedicated Instagram profile to tell people, *“Don’t think that we [Muslims] are weird,”* and to show the differences as well as the similarities between Muslim and non-Muslim cultural and religious practices.

The pervasive lack of trust that some Polish Muslims have toward society in general is both a consequence of their exclusion and a barrier to their integration. This mutual distrust creates a cycle in which negative perceptions and social isolation reinforce each other (Brehm, Rahn 1997). In several interviews, the respondents stated that they hide their beliefs because of fear of their families’ and friends’ reactions. Being aware of the prejudices held by broader society, they are less likely to engage openly with others. This hesitancy reduces opportunities for meaningful interactions that could challenge misconceptions and build mutual understanding. Sociological theories emphasize that trust is a foundational element for social cohesion and integration; without it, individuals and groups remain fragmented and isolated (Thunström et al. 2021; Morey, Yaqin 2015).

This challenge seems to be especially pronounced for Poles who have converted to Islam, as they often struggle to reconcile their new religious identity with their established cultural and national identity. Finding a sense of belonging within their native society becomes fraught with complexity, as their conversion is frequently perceived not merely as a personal spiritual choice but as a departure from the shared cultural heritage that defines Polish identity. The above-mentioned respondent, Anna, confirmed this with the following words:

*“There are a lot of comments from people that you stopped being Polish because you wear a headscarf, or you stopped being Polish because you have a child with an Arab. Although the fact is that these people are quite simply Polish. They teach children the Polish language, the national anthem.”*

Given that Polish society is historically, culturally, and socially deeply influenced by Catholicism, converts to Islam may be viewed with suspicion



or seen as abandoning national traditions (Krotofil et al. 2022). This perception can lead to social alienation (*“If you are a Muslim in Poland, you can certainly feel lonely,”* said Iza, a 29-year-old woman from Warsaw), where converts feel like outsiders in their own country: *“We [Muslims] are strangers and we have to sort of take it on board,”* said Julia, a 49-year-old woman. Such struggles are reflected in subsequent interviews, with Polish Muslims saying that they must constantly assert themselves and prove that *“it is possible to be Polish and to be Muslim.”* The need to defend their place within Polish society places an additional emotional burden on converts, who have to not only navigate the personal journey of their faith but also face external challenges to their national belonging.

Moreover, the intermingling of Polish cultural traditions with Christian practices, particularly Catholic ones, presents significant dilemmas for converts. For instance, religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated nationwide, encompassing not just religious observance but also cultural and familial gatherings. Participation in these events can clash with Islamic principles, compelling converts to choose between maintaining familial and cultural ties or abiding strictly by their faith. Many Muslims opt for a different approach, trying to preserve traditions while ascribing to them new or adapted meanings. For example, Christmas Eve is no longer necessarily viewed as a religious event, but rather as a purely familial gathering (Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. 2023). The cumulative effect of these challenges is that some Polish converts to Islam experience a heightened sense of otherness within their own society.

#### TROUBLED BELONGING AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

When examining the offline dynamics of the Muslim community in Poland, it is more appropriate to discuss diversity rather than exclusion itself, as the community—though relatively small—exhibits significant variety stemming from distinct backgrounds. This diversity is shaped by multiple waves of Muslim presence in Poland, each contributing unique traditions, cultural identities, and religious practices. One of the oldest groups, the Tatar Muslims, have lived in Poland for centuries and maintain a distinct cultural heritage, combining Islamic beliefs with their own long-established traditions and social structures. Another prominent group is that of Muslims who migrated to Poland from the 1960s to the 1990s, often seeking better educational, political, or economic opportunities; many of these individuals brought with them substantial religious knowledge and established cohesive communities. Closely related to

them are their descendants, born in Poland and with mixed backgrounds blending elements of Polish and Islamic culture. Additionally, recent Muslim arrivals include students and immigrants, who further contribute to the community's diversity. Finally, there is a noticeable group of Polish converts to Islam, whose presence reflects a unique combination of Polish cultural identity and Islamic faith. This diversity shapes the multifaceted character of the Polish ummah (Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. 2023).

The diverse backgrounds of Muslims living in Poland have naturally led to the formation of numerous Islamic religious organizations, each oriented toward particular segments of the Muslim community.

Diversity of this nature is not without its complications. Many of these organizations are geared toward a specific demographic and denomination. One notable example is the Muslim Religious Union (Muzułmański Związek Religijny w RP), which for many years restricted membership to Polish citizens only. While technological advances, according to the Muslims who took part in the interviews, have helped mitigate some geographic barriers by enabling Muslims throughout Poland to engage remotely with these organizations, the highly segmented character of religious life can still leave certain believers feeling marginalized, especially considering that not all information is available to everyone. One interviewee, Julia, complained about these divisions and the lack of transparency:

*"That is what annoys me about our Polish Islam. There is a house of prayer in Szczecin that whoever is supposed to know, knows, but why not announce it publicly, so that all interested people would know?"*

The survey data reflects this complex organizational landscape within the Muslim community in Poland today. When asked about their level of trust toward members of the same religious community, respondents provided an average rating of 5.51—the highest trust rating toward people among all groups assessed in the study. However, this category also displayed the highest standard deviation, at 2.85 points, signaling considerable variation in the respondents' attitudes. This disparity may be indicative of many individual troubles connected to belonging to religious groups, as studies show that trust is determined by shared values, communication, and relationship investments (Doney, Barry, Abratt 2007; Ganesan 1994; Morgan, Hunt 1994).

The trust that Muslims living in Poland place in various Muslim organizations reveals both the relative prominence of these groups and the diversity of beliefs within the community. Among the organizations

assessed, the Muslim League in Poland received a trust score of 5.58, while the Muslim Religious Union scored 5.26. Although these scores seem moderate, they are notably higher than the trust placed in the general public. Following these two organizations is the Shia Muslim Unity Association, scoring 4.71; however, one should note that 38% of respondents expressed no opinion on this organization. In contrast, only 13% of respondents had no opinion on either the Muslim League or the Muslim Religious Union, indicating wider recognition and engagement with these groups.

Other Muslim religious organizations are not highly trusted. Another Shia organization—The Islamic Assembly of Ahl-ul-Bayt—had a trust score of only 2.5, while that for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association was 1.13 points. The former is aligned with the ideals of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, while the Ahmadiyya movement self-identifies as Muslim but is not recognized as such by many mainstream Islamic groups.

These trust scores highlight the complex interplay between diversity and potential exclusion within the Polish ummah. Larger organizations, such as the Muslim League and the Muslim Religious Union, enjoy relatively high levels of trust within the surveyed group, particularly when compared to trust in the general public and other institutions. According to the interviewees, these organizations, despite some problems, provide many Muslims in Poland with a sense of belonging and stability, offering spaces where they feel accepted and supported in their religious identity.

#### POLISH UMMAH AT THE CROSSROADS: MUSLIMS IN ONLINE ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTS

Studies indicate that group-level discrimination can, paradoxically, improve individuals' well-being by reinforcing the perception that their struggles are shared rather than singular, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity (Bourguignon et al. 2006). This phenomenon emerged in the interviews, in which Polish Muslims frequently referred to themselves collectively as "us", underscoring the importance of belonging to a broader community. However, this sense of belonging is far from uncomplicated. Indeed, many interviewees reported persistent difficulties in establishing and sustaining a cohesive religious community, in both the physical and the virtual environment.

In particular, intra-community exclusion remains a considerable, though often overlooked, challenge (Górak-Sosnowska 2015). Divisions frequently revolve around ethnic background, with language, culture,

and heritage significantly influencing who is accepted into a particular group (Warمیńska 2001). During the interviews, the respondents said that online platforms only magnify problems due to the relative anonymity they allow. Disagreements regarding religious interpretations and community practices escalate into tensions, thereby fragmenting discussions and magnifying feelings of isolation.

According to the interviews, the online sphere introduces distinct challenges for the Muslim community in Poland, shaping a markedly different communal landscape from that of real-life interactions. Respondents reported a particularly low level of trust toward individuals encountered in this digital environment, with a recorded trust score of 2.64 points. They attributed this pervasive sense of caution primarily to the high degree of anonymity inherent in online spaces. *"We do our best to establish personal contact so that it's not just something online. I do so [...] mainly for security reasons,"* said Jan, a 31-year-old man from a large Polish city. Another respondent—Iwona, a 44-year-old woman from Warsaw—said: *"I rather avoid such conversations and such friendships through groups, where I don't really know who sits on the other side."* Unlike offline settings, where identities are generally established and social bonds develop over time, the internet enables users to create fictitious profiles, allowing them to assume an alternative identity or present themselves as an entirely fabricated person.

Nevertheless, for some individuals living in smaller towns or cities where Muslim communities are virtually non-existent, online platforms are the only opportunity to connect with fellow believers. Moreover, some respondents disclosed that these online groups served as their first deliberate encounter with Islam, providing them with an environment that encouraged them to explore the key religious principles and practices.

In the online sphere, a number of Muslim communities have emerged that vary in terms of size, anonymity, content, and language. According to the interviewees, smaller, friend-based groups often feature closed membership, leaving many without access to these intimate circles. In larger, open groups, while participation is easily accessible, the higher degree of anonymity and varied discourse may leave certain individuals feeling marginalized. Asked about the reasons for leaving these groups, one respondent—Natalia, a 38-year-old woman from Warsaw—said that it resulted from *"some kind of dogmatism more than anything, a sort of narrow-minded approach to certain topics,"* and later added: *"On the internet, everyone expressed themselves more easily, so opinions were divided. I didn't always want to discuss with everyone. I left the group for my own mental health."*

Other interviews with Muslims living in Poland also brought up several issues within online Muslim communities that make meaningful belonging burdensome. A key problem raised was the presence of so-called “quarrelers,” individuals who are highly visible within these groups and frequently provoke tension by pushing inflexible religious views. One respondent—Martyna, a 27-year-old from a large city in Poland—stated: *“That’s how I distanced myself a little from that Muslim community, because I simply found those ‘quarrelers’ overwhelming.”* This unwillingness to accept differing interpretations of faith frequently leads to conflict, creating an environment that many find unwelcoming. As a result, individuals who dislike confrontations or lack the time to engage in these contentious exchanges often limit their participation or withdraw from such groups entirely. *“I used to be active on various groups as well, but I’ve noticed that sometimes it’s such a scuffle and I’ve decided to focus on things that will help me grow as a person,”* said Patrycja, a 27-year-old who was born and raised Muslim.

Closely linked to this issue is the imposition of unrealistic religious standards that many encounter in these spaces. These high expectations can leave some members feeling that they are “not good enough,” fostering self-doubt and discouraging active engagement. This atmosphere of judgment and rigidity contributes to a process of self-exclusion that cannot be dismissed, since it is frequently a response to the actions of other community members who, through their behavior, create an environment in which some Muslims feel unwelcome or inadequate within their own religious group. One interviewee—Helena, a 25-year-old student—said:

*“I started to notice that these Muslim women on Instagram were taking such a black-and-white approach to everything [...]. It started to tire me out, since I haven’t been practicing for long, and not everything always works out as it should, so it was really demotivating me. I’ve also noticed that such ‘quarrelers’ are often very vocal on certain topics, yet do things completely differently. [...] And it’s this kind of hypocrisy that really turns me off.”*

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges faced by some Polish Muslims in fulfilling their fundamental need for belonging, both within Polish society and their own religious communities. The findings revealed the multifaceted nature of these challenges, shaped by societal prejudices, intra-community divisions, and the complexities of navigating dual identities in a predominantly Catholic nation.

On a societal level, a significant number of Polish Muslims experience exclusion driven by Islamophobic attitudes and negative stereotypes. The survey data revealed a significantly lower level of trust among Muslims compared with the general population, highlighting a pervasive sense of caution and alienation in social interactions.

Within the Muslim community, diversity in cultural, ethnic, and theological backgrounds enriches religious life but also contributes to fragmentation. Offline, divisions are often influenced by ethnic ties, while online platforms exaggerate tensions through anonymity and rigid discussions on religious practices.

The findings demonstrate that, for many Polish Muslims, belonging is shaped by intersecting societal, organizational, and interpersonal factors. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of some Polish Muslims and underscores the importance of fostering trust and belonging in diverse communities.

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## Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted experiences of Polish Muslims as they navigate belonging within both offline and online environments. Using data from a survey and semi-structured interviews, the study illustrates how issues of trust, religious identity, and social exclusion intersect in a predominantly Catholic society. The findings show that widespread skepticism toward Islam and negative media portrayals contribute to Polish Muslims' heightened sense of caution and lower level of general trust in comparison to the broader population. Converts to Islam report additional pressures, particularly regarding cultural customs and familial ties, which can amplify feelings of marginalization. Within the Muslim community itself, ethnic, national, and denominational differences give rise to multiple religious organizations. Although they can foster solidarity, they also risk over-fragmenting the wider ummah. While online social media offer valuable



spaces for initial exploration of Islam, they can also heighten intra-group tensions. Study participants describe the community as marked by “quarrelers” and rigid religious standards that discourage open, inclusive dialogue. Overall, the research suggests that Polish Muslims face “troubled belonging” on two fronts: external exclusion stemming from societal mistrust, and internal divisions resulting from diverse religious and cultural practices.

*keywords:* Polish Muslims, troubled belonging, religious identity, marginalization, social trust, social media