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ISLAM IN EUROPE: THE UNEXCEPTIONAL CASE

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of ‘Islam in Europe’ alongside that of ‘religion in Europe’, indicating aspects of, and consequences of, the inter-influence between the two. An underlying theme is that there is little value in seeking to understand Islam in Europe as a category on its own, as the state of flux characterising the latter is to a large extent symptomatic of and simultaneously catalytic for the flux around religion-in-general in Europe. This much is evident in engagements with Islam at the supranational (European) level, in debates and policy developments around Islam within individual nation-states, and in local level adaptations to religious plurality traced through empirical studies of the Muslim presence in a number of towns across Europe.¹

Keywords: Islam; religion in Europe; subsidiarity; pluralism; national identity crises; local policies

I suspect that the mere title of my paper – ‘Islam in Europe’ – might evoke amongst readers a heavy sort of ‘ugh’ feeling, accompanied by the thought that it is such an overdone, heavy, and *large* topic, and one steeped in generalisations, controversy, and at the heart of debates along unpleasant lines to do with racism, exclusion, xenophobia, radicalism, terrorism, etc. Indeed, a discussion on Islam in Europe is rarely a walk in the park.

Rather than focus on this list of un-pleasantries, I propose to place the topic within the broader framework of religion in Europe in general, and to focus on the mutual influence between Islam in Europe, on the one hand, and religion in Europe, on the other. Specifically, my approach to the topic derives from the contention that the experience of and reception of Islam in Europe is profoundly influenced by, and influential upon, the experience of and reception of religion-in-general in Europe.

Although this particular contention might be somewhat lacking in profundity for sociologists of religion, I submit that it bears a great potential contribution to the broader understanding of a series of intense social and political problems around (if only superficially so) Islam in Europe. Accordingly, this approach carries significant explanatory value useful for a range of disciplines that are increasingly turning their attention to Islam in Europe, without however sufficient understanding of how the latter is embedded in a complex web of historical trajectories of religion in each

country case, and in Europe as a whole. It is to the characteristics, and repercussions, of this embeddedness that I turn my attention here, and at three different levels: the supranational, the national, *and* the local level. Throughout I will maintain a focus on public policies related to religion.

Before delving into each of these three levels, I will spoil the punch lines by noting two things. First, both Islam in Europe, and religion in general in Europe, are characterised by a situation of flux, in fact extreme flux in various directions. Thus rather than grand statements on either category, it is best to examine mechanisms influencing both, and in what ways. Second, Islam is often treated as a category unto itself. One theme underlying my paper is a denial of the common assumption that Islam is a unique case; the notions of particularism, uniqueness or impenetrability have been highly overrated (Halliday 1996). The latter is a central theme in much of the work of International Relations scholar and friend from the London School of Economics Fred Halliday, who sadly passed away this year and to whom I dedicate my efforts here.

Conceptual framework

By way of setting out a conceptual framework, I must explain what I mean by Islam in Europe. Both these terms in my title are of limited analytical value in and of themselves. To start backwards, 'Europe' is a notoriously contested concept, with its indistinct borders and intense debates about who does or does not belong to this privileged entity (Schlesinger 1994). A historically vague and philosophically loaded *construct*, even in contemporary terms we are still unsure what we mean by Europe (Delanty 1995). For example, is it a geographical or a cultural unit? This uncertainty is exacerbated by the European Union in its self-appointed role as a definer of Europe and of European belonging (a result of the latter being that a handful of countries, Turkey foremost of these, have at times conceived of EU membership as confirmation of their Europeaness (see Kundera 1984; Amiraux 2007; Zubaida 1996).

Meanwhile, Islam as a singular concept is also to be questioned. As Aziz al-Azmeh (1993) has articulated, 'there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it', and this applies globally as it does to the European context. Further, the plurality of Islam pertains to Islam as a religion, in a theological sense, *as to* Islam as a social and political system. In Fred Halliday's words, 'As an object of social and political analysis, or as a force in international affairs, there is little that can be explained, praised or denounced by reference to a unitary 'Islam'' (Halliday 1996: 2). There are differences according to whether Muslim groupings are autochthonous or immigrant, and, in the latter case, according to the origins of immigrant communities (whether Arab, African or Asian Muslims, Bengali or Pakistani, etc.). There are variations according to particularities of the host communities; and of course according to generation and gender; objective versus subjective conceptions of identity; and cultural, ethnic, political and/or theological references and motivations (Fokas 2007) – all distinctions with which readers of this journal are most likely familiar.

My reference point, instead, is exactly those prevalent but yet rarely themselves subjected to scrutiny, those generalised, mediatised and politicised notions conceiving of Islam (*in the abstract*) as a *problem* in and for Europe. I choose this focus of study because it is, in my view, at the heart of the polarization and of the challenges to co-existence in multi-religious societies that have brought religion into the purview of so many diverse disciplines of study today. By default then, my scope is necessarily limited to western Europe and to Islam as a phenomenon linked to mass migration (including family reunification, asylum seeking, etc.). Thus, my time frame is also limited, addressing a relatively recent phenomenon of the last four or so decades.

So much for what I mean by 'Islam in Europe'. By 'religion in Europe', which in this paper I hold up for parallel examination with Islam in Europe, I mean the current amorphous state of affairs whereby Europe is, for some, still the bastion of secularisation (Berger 1999, 2000), and according to others, a continent on the verge of post-secularity (Byrnes and Katzenstein 2006; or, ought to be moving in this direction - Habermas 2006). In other words, 'religion in Europe in general' brings to mind a fluid situation of rapid religious decline amongst some faith groups and some countries, rapid religious growth in some faith groups in some countries; a proliferation of New Religious Movements; a new prominence of spirituality – conceived of as a new or renewed force; and, of course, the increasing presence and visibility of Islam. All of the above – critically – stands against the backdrop of a history of secularisation, part and parcel of scholarly *wishful thinking* about secularisation, what José Casanova (2006) calls a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby for many at least the concept of Europe is, and should be, inextricably linked to secularity.

Complicating this picture even further, of course, is the fact that at the national level we find vastly different states of both religiousness and secularisation (in all the meanings of the latter term – religious decline, privatisation, and institutional differentiation). In each country the trajectories of religion have been shaped in different ways by the legacies of the Enlightenment, but at the same time by their own histories of nation-state formation and the role of particular political and religious elites in this, by patterns in church-state relations, and by a myriad other factors the volume and weight of which ought not be underestimated (see Martin 1978; Rémond 1999). The same situation of flux and diversity also exists, of course, in cities and towns across Europe, influenced by historical particularities of each locality, local politicians, etc.

It is into this complex picture of diversity and change at each of these levels that Islam – in the sense described above – has been 'inserted' into Europe. And it is the resulting ever more complex picture, including this 'insertion', which I am exploring here.

Let me now consider each of these levels of religious governance – the supranational, the national, and the local – in turn.

(Multiple) Trends at the supranational, European level

At the supranational, European level the European Union and its related institutions serve as focal points for public policy related to religion. That said, the EU is notable for its *lack* of policy on religion, and for the enormous difficulties that arise when it has sought to make grand statements on religion. The heated pan-European debates on the reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the preamble to the planned European Constitution are a case in point. The European integration project has unmistakable religious roots (specifically, Christian, and in fact Roman Catholic) (see Leustean and Madeley 2009; Nelsen and Stubb 2003), but it also has a current strident aim to be religiously neutral. Meanwhile, it represents an extremely diverse body of nations with differing ideals as regards the EU's religious versus neutral (or indeed secular) identity. Unsurprisingly then, we find a conspicuous degree of variation, change, and in some cases, contradiction in the EU's approach to religion. A certain degree of contradiction is evident even when considering two of the EU's foundational principles: the principle of subsidiarity, and the principle of pluralism (see Fokas 2009). On the one hand, with respect to national specificity, the principle of subsidiarity indicates that matters that can be effectively addressed at the national level should be addressed there, without EU intervention. This principle clearly favours the dominant, majority religious situation in each member country (whether that situation is marked by advanced secularity or by close church-state relations). As a result, the principle of subsidiarity gets into potential trouble when it comes to religious minorities: how can the privileging of the majority religious situation be reconciled with the needs and demands of religious minorities?

Enter here the second foundational principle of the EU under consideration: that of pluralism. The EU claims to be religiously and philosophically neutral, but devoted to the principle of pluralism. Accordingly, it aims to influence member states in such a way as to create environments conducive to the flourishing of diversity and pluralism.

Of course, the two principles needn't be contradictory and the EU has generally pursued both simultaneously, by supporting national identities and their religious specificities, as well as the religious identities of minority groups through the adaptation to religious rights and freedoms legislation (for example, by upholding the European Convention on Human Rights). But subsidiarity and pluralism *do* come into conflict in particular cases, for example when the handling of religious matters in certain member states is not conducive to the flourishing of pluralism, but rather quite the opposite. And it is here that the lack of EU explicit policies on religion is particularly conspicuous.

Instead of formal policies on religion, different EU institutions have embarked upon gradual, informal, and largely ad hoc process of incorporating religion into their spheres of influence. For example, the European Commission has a series of mechanisms for communication with religious groups. The initiatives began mainly during the reign of Jacques Delors as president of the Commission (1985–94), during which time he launched a campaign to discover a 'Soul for Europe'. Delors famously stated:

If in the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up. This is why I want to revive the intellectual and spiritual debate on Europe. I invite the churches [*notably, only churches at the time*] to participate actively in it... (Delors 1992).

In other words, early European Commission engagement with religion was a function of meeting transparent *political* EU objectives. As one scholar notes, 'the invitation to religious leaders was part of an attempt at further legitimising a European Commission often labelled a soulless technocracy and deemed a symbol of Europe's democratic deficit' (Massignon 2007: 128). It is important to note that there were no Muslim representatives present during this early stage of relations between the European Commission and religious leaders. At the end of Delors' second term as President of the Commission he invited Catholic, Protestant and Jewish representatives to an interfaith meeting and, at the last minute, the invitation was extended to Humanist and Muslim representatives. However, the selection of Muslim representatives was awkward due to the lack of a Europe-wide structured representation similar to that in other European religious and philosophical traditions (a symptom of course of a broader difficulty regarding Muslim representation). Thus, the invited Muslim guests were the secretary general of the Turkish-Muslim Union of Germany, and a French Muslim intellectual, neither of whom could, or would seek to, claim to represent Muslims in Europe. Thus the Muslim presence was simply a symbolic one initially (Massignon 2007). But the search for Muslim representation triggered, in turn, efforts at mobilization on the part of certain Muslim groups.

De facto the European Commission approach to religion evolved in response to a number of contingent factors, including for example shifting priorities at the end of the Cold War, the prospect of Turkish accession to the EU, the immigration flows from Muslim countries, and especially in the aftermath of 11th September 2001 (Silvestri 2009: 1216). As one observer puts it, 'the «practice» and the «necessity» of dealing with faith matters and with living religious communities have gradually «imposed themselves», in an environment that institutionally, politically ... and from a legal perspective, is not supposed to and/or easily willing to deal with these issues' (Silvestri 2009: 1221). The latest stage in the evolution is Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty (the Treaty drafted after the Constitutional Treaty was rejected by the Dutch and the French in their national referenda); Article 17 states that the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and religious organisations. However, the Article also ensures that states retain sovereign competence over the management of relations with faith communities and that therefore the EU remains neutral in this regard (Bureau of European Policy Advisors 2010).

The European Parliament has also hosted its own programme promoting religious dialogue entitled 'A Soul for Europe: Ethics and Spirituality' (1999–2005). However, the programme did not have any legal implications and the dialogue between faiths resulted in only a few events where the spiritual consequences of European enlargement and integration were discussed (Leustean and Madeley 2009). In general, religion holds a relatively prominent place within the European Parliament, not least because

Christianity features explicitly in the names of several political parties represented in the Parliament which belong to the largest translational grouping in the parliament – the European People's Party/European Democrats (EPP-ED). This group in particular holds seminars on Islam and Christianity and interfaith and intercultural meetings (Silvestri 2009). Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) occasionally issues statements and opinions related to religion, a most recent one being a condemnation of any general ban on the burqa, the niqab, or any other religious clothing, and a call on Switzerland to repeal its general ban on the construction of minarets, which it described as discriminatory (PACE Resolution 2010).

On the whole, it can be said that the European Union institutions in general represent an emphasis on multiculturalism, increasingly so in direct response to the growing Muslim presence in Europe and the proliferation of religion-related issues demanding attention. Other European institutions, conversely, seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

A case in point is the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the European level court that deals most with religion-related cases. It is not formally a European Union institution, but all EU member states are required to be signatories of the European Convention on Human Rights, which the Court defends; and at the time of writing, discussions are under way regarding the EU becoming a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Several observers have noted a trend of the Court towards more secularist approaches (Langlaude 2006; Koenig 2010). Matthias Koenig (2010) sees a three-step evolution of the Court's jurisprudence on matters of religion, leading increasingly to assertive secularist stances. The first step consists of a broad definition of religious freedom which tends to work in favour of majority religion over negative religious freedom claims – for example, the maintenance of asymmetric blasphemy laws as in the case of *Otto-Preminger-Institute vs. Austria* (1993), where the Court defended the state's right to seize and forfeit a film considered offensive to Christians. The second stage reflects a tendency of the Court to uphold secularism, mostly through cases to do with Islam. Characteristic here is the case of *Leyla Sahin vs. Turkey* (2005), in which it upheld a ban on wearing the Islamic headscarf at Turkish universities. Finally, the third phase in ECtHR jurisprudence transposes the secularist line of argument in cases related to Islam, onto cases involving Christian majorities. In other words, in this latter stage, the Court may be seen not only as ceasing to protect majority religious rights but also actively influencing the status quo of church-state relations in signatory nations. The recent, though still unresolved, *Lautsi vs. Italy* (2009) decision is a case in point, where the Court ruled that the display of the crucifix in Italian classrooms is in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. Specifically, on 3 November, 2009, the display of the crucifix was found to violate article 2 of Protocol No.1, the right of parents to educate their children in accordance with their religious or philosophical beliefs, and article 9, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Italian State sought and won a referral of the case to the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. That hearing took place on the 30th June, with an unprecedented number of states, associations and individuals allowed to intervene in the

hearing with statements either for or against the original ruling (law professor Joseph Weiler was amongst the latter; see Weiler 2010 for his critique of the ruling). The final decision has not yet been released at the time of writing.

Koenig's observations are tentative, but should they hold, one might consider the extent to which Islam has played a catalytic role in the evolution of the Court's jurisprudence towards a more hard-line secularism and one which, inevitably, influences religion in Europe in general.

Debates and 'crises' at the national level

Attention to the European Court of Human Rights provides a nice transition to our next level of study – the national level – if we consider the divergent ways various nations interpret the European Convention's Article 9, on religious freedom. (On elements of convergence of national level religious governance with international human rights norms, see Koenig 2007; see also Bader 2007 for a counter-perspective.) As expressed in a 2005 *Economist* article aptly entitled 'Welcome to the confused and the confusing world of European Islam':

A Danish supermarket fires a cashier for wearing a headscarf on the grounds that it might get stuck in the till. The German state of Baden-Württemberg prohibits the wearing of headscarves by teachers, not students. France bans the garment altogether from state schools, citing Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. A British court cites the same article to uphold a schoolgirl's right to wear the much bulkier covering known as a jilbab (*The Economist* 29.10.2005).

Certainly Europe represents a kaleidoscope of national approaches to religion. A great deal of literature on Islam in Europe focuses on different countries' reception of the Muslim presence in their midst. Explanatory factors include differences in church-state relations (Minkenburg 2008a, 2008b; Cesari 2004), differences in citizenship policies and ideologies (Koopmans et al. 2005; Bloemraad et al. 2008), and differences in political resources available to Muslims (Fetzer and Soper 2005), to name a few. To this list I would add the relationship between religion and national identity, a much more 'fluid' concept than the others, manifested in all kinds of symbols around us, including flags, anthems, depictions on currency, etc. (Billig 1995). This attention to religion and national identity follows the reasoning prevalent in David Martin's work since his 1978 *A General Theory of Secularization*. It is also heavily influenced by my experience of the Greek situation, where indeed there are formal links between church and state, but far more formative of responses to the Muslim presence are predominant conceptions of Greek national identity as intrinsically linked to the Orthodox faith. Such conceptions are significantly deeper and, I submit, more consequential (in a negative sense, for religious minorities), than are formal links between church and state. The relationship between religion and national identity in the Greek case has been painstakingly and calculatingly maintained through 'the production and reproduction of collective memory managed and maintained by clergy, theologians and academics, propagated through official speeches, commemorative acts and other media and then duplicated

through the school curriculum and holidays' (Roudometof 2010: 29). The religion-national identity link is also maintained through politicians yielding to church pressure, particularly around election time. And the religion and national identity link is, arguably, the main and steadfast buttress of the strong ties between church and state in Greece (Fokas 2000, 2006).

It is on this last dimension – the relationship between religion and national identity – that I focus in my attention to the national level. In so doing though, I do not embrace a strict path-dependence approach. Although historical factors influencing the relationship between religion and national identity are critical in each national case, central to my thinking is the idea that there is room for change and, in fact, radical change. A path dependent perspective might have missed, for example, the current climate in Denmark or the Netherlands as regards attitudes to Islam.

In an insightful article entitled *Bavarian Crucifixes and French Headscarves*, Leonora Auslander (2000) draws a comparison between the debates that broke out in France over the Muslim headscarf in 1989, and those over the crucifix in public schools in Bavaria in 1985.² In the former case, which entailed the official inception of the French 'affaire du foulard', the principle of a suburban Parisian school suspended three Muslim girls for refusing to remove their headscarves in school; in the latter case, a set of parents, followers of a strand of mystical humanism deriving from Protestantism, requested that the crucifix be removed from their daughters' classrooms in their Bavarian school. In the national debates over these two developments, Auslander traces the evolution from a crisis in the relationship between religion and national identity in each case (in the French case, what is becoming of our *laïcité*? In the Bavarian case, what is becoming of our Catholic roots?), to a crisis regarding the threat to national identity *represented by* religious others. The article also indicates how Muslim immigration became a central element in the debate on national identity, *even* in the Bavarian case, involving no Muslims, because comparisons were drawn imagining classrooms full of headscarves but no crucifixes.

At the present juncture in nations across western Europe, we see both elements of evolution at play. In other words, we see instances of crises in national identity transmutating into crises to do with the Muslim presence, *and* *visa versa*. A series of national examples follow which support the point.

First, though, it is instructive to consider Fred Halliday's (1996) precept that 'myths of an Islamic threat', *like* myths of nationalism, are part of the rhetorical baggage of political struggle, employed by both those who wish to retain power and those who aspire to attain power: 'As long as such interests exist', he writes, 'myths will continue to be generated – to legitimize, to mislead, to silence, to mobilize' (Halliday 1996: 6–7). And even in cases where such myths have been publically disproven, they can acquire a considerable life of their own.

The 'myth' of a threat to national identity represented by Islam is indeed politically expedient for those who propagate such; it is a very powerful mobilising factor and develops a life of its own even when the myth itself has been undermined. A case in point is French President Nicholas Sarkozy's launching of a national debate on French national identity at the end of 2009 (see *Débat sur l'identité nationale* 2010). 'It's a

familiar story', writes one French commentator, 'Every time France is in trouble, and when its politicians are in need of public support, they reach for a supposedly unfailing remedy: the nation' (de Beer 2009). In an environment of high unemployment and popular dissatisfaction with the political status quo and, critically, ahead of regional elections, 'politicians find it easier to instil fear of a *burqa* than search for more than band-aid solutions to economic and social problems' (de Beer 2010). In the speech launching the debate on national identity, Sarkozy declared that 'France is diverse and always has been...but there is no place in France for the *burqa* or for the enslavement of women... To become French means to adhere to a form of civilisation, to values and customs' (de Beer 2009). The debate was meant to boost Sarkozy's support, but it had the unexpected effect of boosting a dispirited *Front National* instead (de Beer 2009). Sarkozy tried and failed to reclaim the debate – *it* had acquired a life of its own. As one French news report put it, 'The debate on national identity was supposed to define what it meant to be French, but it swiftly descended into a bitter argument over the presence of Islam in France' (Government moves 2010).

In the Netherlands too, recent policies related to Islam are presented in terms of a crisis in national identity. Indeed the Dutch case is perhaps the most striking, not least because of its colourful figures, including the late Pim Fortuyn and the highly controversial Geert Wilders – both, notably, propagating perceptions of an Islamic threat, and seeing political gains in this. The murder of Theo van Gogh is, of course, a turning point, discussed by many analysts as signalling the death of Dutch multiculturalism and, by extension, as the onset of a national identity crisis. A list of article titles, much of it Dutch self-critique, makes the point: 'The sorrow of the Netherlands' (van Tijen 2002); 'Too much Islam? Challenges to the Dutch model' (Landman 2007); 'After tolerance' (Veenkamp 2004); and, more provocatively, '«Become like us»: the Dutch and racism' (Hondius 2003). (In fact, the first and last of these were written in the aftermath of Pim Fortuyn's murder which, for some, is actually a first turning point influencing the impending questioning of Dutch national identity.) A recurrent theme in current debates is the extent to which multiculturalism and tolerance were indeed fundamental to Dutch national identity, born on the one hand of the tradition of pillarisation and, on the other, of the stark departure from pillarisation and intensive secularisation that came in the 60s together with a sexual revolution (Valenta 2006). Whatever the case, some Dutch analysts argue, today both tolerance and multiculturalism are departing from Dutch society, and in their wake reactionary policy developments are born. The relatively early Dutch moves towards a ban on the *burqa* in 2006 can be seen from within this prism. So too the discussions of changing article 23 of the Dutch constitution so as to ban any state funding of religiously (including Christian) based institutions (Buijs 2009: 424).

We see some of the same themes repeated in the Swiss case: opportunistic propagation by politicians and the media of a threat posed by Islam to the Swiss way of life. To champion the minaret ban during the campaign, the 'Islamic threat' was presented in posters that depicted a skyline full of minarets (though there are only four in Switzerland as a whole), with the minarets resembling rockets. The paragraph added to Article 72 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, stating that 'The building of minarets is

forbidden', sent shock waves across the globe, but even within Switzerland where the referendum results surprised most analysts. (Notably, that clause literally takes the place of another clause present in the Constitution until 2001, calling for state approval of the establishment of any new Catholic bishoprics, the latter clause being a remnant of 19th c. tension between the Swiss state and the Catholic Church. See Mayer 2009). Member of Parliament Oskar Freysinger described developments around Islam in Switzerland as a threat to the way of life that the Swiss have struggled to establish from the Enlightenment onwards. In one aspect of the anti-minaret campaign, Freysinger expressed his worry about the 'future of the West' specifically with reference to the European Court of Human Rights ruling that crucifixes should be removed from school rooms in Italy, 'at the same time that Muslim symbols could freely penetrate European public spaces' (Mayer 2009). He thus used this limitation on Christian symbols as an additional tool to provoke fear.

In fact, the juxtaposition of the two developments is interesting. It was in early November 2009 that the Italian state argued, unsuccessfully, in the *Lautsi vs. Italy* case, that the crucifix is a symbol of Italian national identity that should be allowed as such in public schools. And later that same month, also with reference to national identity, the Swiss passed a law banning the building of minarets.

Clearly I have had to be highly selective in my examples and have presented a necessarily limited picture. But the point carries broader purchase. Namely, that a recurrent theme throughout many Western European countries is a national identity concern which is often provoked by, but is clearly much *broader* than, Islam itself; and that this national identity concern is intimately connected to the place of religion in general in the public sphere in each case.

Insights from the local level

For my consideration of the local level I draw on data gathered through the European Commission-funded project entitled 'Welfare and Values in Europe: transitions related to religion, minorities and gender', in which I took part. The project was based in Uppsala. It included partners in 12 European countries, and it ran from 2006 to 2009. The project's main aim was to examine interaction between minorities and majorities in medium-sized towns in each country and to glean insight into mechanisms influencing trends in conflict and/or cohesion between and within majority and minority groups. And welfare served as the prism through which all of the above would be addressed: by examining aspects of welfare provision in each case study, the project traced the impact of values and religions on majority-minority relations. In most localities studied, Muslims constituted a significant minority group, and it is from those cases that I draw insights now, gradually narrowing the scope to two Nordic cases: Sweden and Norway.³

A first critical finding helped to dispel monolithic conceptions of either 'the majority' or 'the minority'. Namely, it is that conflict over religion and values is not limited to majority-minority relations, and certainly not to Islam. The Italian case of Padua

offered one of the more nuanced examples, where secular-minded members of the majority and of minority groups together opposed the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on reproductive health policy. In other words, the secular-religious divide, at least, must be considered alongside conceptions of a Muslim-non-Muslim divide. But the former should also be further nuanced, beyond the secular/religious fault-line, to distinguish progressive versus conservative religious values (Frisina and Cancellieri 2008).

A second conspicuous finding is the similarities between the local level in the different countries, and a certain disconnect between the local level situation in each case and that being portrayed at the national level by the mass media. Whereas the national level often offered a picture of conflict and threat, at the local level many encouraging examples of cohesion and cooperation were manifest. For example, in the German case of Reutlingen the researcher described a success story around the building of a local mosque – and of course we rarely hear success stories around that theme within Europe! The project was described with satisfaction by a Muslim representative of its steering committee; and several local firms were involved in the project, thus leading the researcher to portray the project as a significant contribution to social cohesion in the city (Albert and Leis-Peters 2008: 21). In Evreux, France, majority religious associations and individuals voiced their disapproval of the harsh way ‘illegal’ immigrants (mainly Muslims) were handled by trying to shelter them and their families from the police (Valasik 2008: 15–16).

Where some dissonances arose between majorities and minorities at the local level, practical solutions were most often sufficient to solve the problems. For example, in a local public school in Gävle, Sweden, an imam whose children were to attend the school, together with the parents of other Muslim students, requested a series of negotiation meetings with the headmasters to discuss the religious needs of the Muslim students. A document entitled ‘Advice and guidelines for the Muslim pupils at X school, 2005’ was produced, wherein solutions were set out for a number of religion-related either exemptions or requests (e.g., regarding school meals, prayer times, etc.). The headmasters stressed that they see these issues as practical issues that must and can be solved (Pettersson and Edgardh 2008: 22). The practical handling of practical issues helps avoid them becoming loaded symbolically.

Likewise in Drammen, Norway, in order to avoid poor participation in parent-teacher meetings, native tongue assistants were available during the meetings. There has not been in Drammen, to my knowledge, a passionate debate protesting weak handling of the Norwegian language amongst immigrants. Instead, an obligatory, free and generous, and thus practical, programme for Norwegian lessons is on offer.

In examples where the dissonance was more pronounced, a media involvement and twist was most often a central factor (I note this without wishing to criticize the media in general). In the Norwegian case, a Turkish-Muslim after-school homework assistance programme for boys, which included an accommodation dimension, caused an uproar in Drammen when the media publicised it (Angell and Briseid 2008: 19). Fear was created about a danger to the community, that the homework assistance programme served as a pretext for Qur’anic education, and that it threatened social cohesion (2008:

20). The media most likely did not report that, for example, the boys are asked to speak only in Norwegian to each other when doing their homework, and that watching Norwegian news and children's programmes is part of the strategy to enhance the children's chances of successful integration into Norwegian society. The media might also have been uninterested in the fact that a large majority of Muslims in Drømmen oppose separate education for Muslims and favour shared schooling since it enhances their integration into Norwegian society (2008: 13). (However, in this case the local media was aware of and acknowledged this fact. One potentially positive result of the 'uproar' is that a municipal council committee recommended that all municipal schools in Drømmen should offer homework assistance programmes to their pupils.)

Similarly, in the case of Gävle, the media generated a strong protest over the exemption of Muslim girls from swimming education, perhaps rightly so, but with headlines like 'The rules of the Imam direct X school', and 'Is it up to him to rule?' (Pettersson and Edgardh 2008: 18). The aforementioned document on the 'Advice and guidelines for the Muslim pupils at X school' was repealed in the face of public debates that followed. However, another practical solution was found: the possibility of *separate* swimming classes was extended to the girls in question, and no new formal document was drawn up since, according to the headmasters, 'the guidelines are so integrated in the school today, that a formal document is not needed' (Pettersson and Edgardh 2008: 22).

Across several case studies, researchers noted similarities between Muslim immigrant groupings and other immigrant groupings. For example, immigrants tend to share in common a stronger emphasis on the family. What is often interpreted from the outside as unhealthy self-segregation (a critique launched most against Muslims and less so against other immigrant groups) is, from the immigrants' perspectives, a healthy and natural buttressing of the family unit.

The Swedish researchers also noted similarities between the family values of Muslim groups today and those of the Swedes about 150 years ago, since which time Swedes have been increasingly 'fostered to liberate themselves from the dependency of the family' (Pettersson and Edgardh 2008: 30). Clearly, family cohesion is also a value amongst majority communities in many European contexts, *but*, as Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon (2008) explains, it is the *hierarchy* of values that is different.

There are also what one research group describes as 'invisible national norms' at play which sometimes lead to tensions between majority and minority communities (Pettersson and Edgardh 2008). Examples from the Norwegian and Swedish cases include the principle of the non-differentiation between the sexes; the taken-for-grantedness of using church buildings for school functions; and the importance of parental volunteering (for example, at school sports events), and of student participation in extra-curricular field trips. But through a process of communication and negotiation, none of the above has proven to be an impenetrable problem area between Muslims and non-Muslims in the cases studied.

This is not to say that there are *no* significant values differences between Muslims and majority societies in the various localities across Europe. However, the WaVE material points to a much healthier situation when the propagation of myths of a threat

from Islam is more or less absent and when Muslims are addressed, as Jytte Klausen (2005) puts it, as ‘simply a new interest group and a new constituency’ (2005: 3). The WaVE data also supports the notion that Islam should not be treated as a category unto itself, and that where fault lines exist within localities, these are not necessarily drawn (in fact, they *rarely* are) along Muslim-non-Muslim lines.

Conclusions

I will close with three succinct points, by way of conclusion. First, a central argument made here is similar to that articulated by Jim Beckford regarding New Religious Movements, in his classic *Cult Controversies* (1985): namely, that the controversies often reveal more about the societies in which they are occurring than they do about the movements themselves. This timeless lesson applies equally to Islam as to other religious groupings ‘inserted’, so to speak, into societies of a different majority faith. Through a consideration of Islam in Europe, we can learn a great deal about taken for granted norms in a given context – whether at the European, the national, or the local level – and about how these norms influence the reception of Islam, and how they are *influenced* by the presence of Islam. And this supports the point that there is little value in seeking to understand Islam in Europe as a category on its own: as we have seen at all three levels of analysis, Islam is not a unique case. Religion-in-general is also the root of debates across Europe, and this colours perspectives on Islam in Europe. Meanwhile, national identity crises accompanied by active propagation of myths of an Islamic threat reveal broader factors at play than simply a ‘normal’ reaction to the Muslim presence. And at the local level, where devoid of myths of a threat, we are left mainly with examples of practical solutions found for practical problems, and similarities between Muslims and other groupings, past and present. The failure to recognise the unexceptionality of Islam in this regard is eloquently critiqued by Aziz al-Azmeh (1993):

We can surely assume that among the permanent acquisitions of the social and human sciences is the realization that ideological and other forms of collective representation are unthinkable without internal change and structural bearing. And it is a fact that this acquisition is almost invariably put to use in the study of contemporary ideologies, mass movements and other phenomena of European histories and realities. But it is not generally put to use regarding *phenomena islamica*, which are regarded as generically closed, utterly exotic, repellently mysterious, utterly exceptionalist’ (1993: 1).

Second, not only are both Islam in Europe and religion in Europe in flux, as noted at the outset, but this state of flux is also affected by interplay between the three levels of the supranational, the national and the local. For example, European policies on religion influence developments in individual nations, and developments in individual nations lead to European-level policy-making. (From different perspectives, both Silvio Ferrari (2006) and Matthias Koenig (2007: 916) describe a convergence in European nation-states’ handing of religious affairs through the influence of the European

Union. For Koenig, this influence has less to do with an aim to resolve religion-related problems, but rather is designed to guarantee individual rights and respect religious diversity. See also Koenig 2009.) Meanwhile, national debates colour perceptions at the local level, and local level insights can – though, unfortunately, they rarely seem to, if one is to judge on the basis of the WaVE material – impact upon national legislation

Finally, and related to the latter, this situation of flux exists both in real and normative terms. In relation to the former, we have a vibrancy of Islamic faith and practice alongside new religious movements and new expressions of spirituality, on the one hand, and on the other we have political and legislative moves towards the limitation of religion in the public sphere such as in the Lautsi ruling and the bans on the burqa or minarets either implemented or under discussion in European states. At the normative level, we have the juxtaposition of the very diverse writings (both in terms of content and scholarly quality) of Jürgen Habermas, José Casanova, Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Bikhu Parekh, John Gray, Marcel Gauchet, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, *all* engaged in intense debates on whether we are or should be moving towards a post-secular Europe. In this context it is exceedingly difficult to determine in what direction the winds are blowing regarding religion in Europe; and it is, meanwhile, imprudent to try to develop an understanding of Islam in Europe *independently* of religion-in-general in Europe.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is a slightly edited version of the keynote address on ‘Islam in Europe’ delivered at the Nordic Sociology of Religion Conference at the University of Agder, Kristiansand, 4–6 August 2010.
- ² This article is referenced here to make a particular point general to Islam at the national level and not to raise examples from the French and German cases; I should note in particular that the Bavarian case is not intended as in any way representative of the German context as a whole.
- ³ The following is based strictly on *my own interpretation* of the case study reports drafted by each researcher in the project; to consult the case study reports directly, see WaVE reports 2009.

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