

Islam in European Publics: Secularism and Religious Difference¹

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The European nations are witnessing unprecedented forms of encounter with Islam. The claims of new generations of migrant Muslims within European nation-states, but also the Turkish claim for membership in the European Union, raise a series of public debates, which particularly focus on the presence of Muslims in Europe, and generally address Western cultural values of democracy. Europe (meaning both European nations and the European Union) becomes a central site for this encounter. Furthermore, the Europe-based controversies have spread into other publics and provoked conflicts at a global scale. The cartoon controversy, for example—the publication of cartoons on Islam and the Prophet in a Danish right-wing newspaper created a debate on the relation between freedom of expression and religious tolerance at the European scale, but provoked anger and protestation in the Middle East, expanding the debate to other Muslim publics, including Indonesia and Pakistan.

The “old” Europe is being transformed by its encounter with contemporary Islam—an Islam that is reappropriated, interpreted, and revitalized in political and cultural terms by a new generation of Muslim actors. I am not, therefore, referring to Islam as a distinct and separate civilization, but as an idiom that provides a source for the redefinition of collective identity and self-affirmation of Muslims in modern contexts. By Islam, I refer to the ways in which Muslims interpret and perform religious faith in their individual and collective agencies. It is most often among the members of social groups

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who have been uprooted, who have moved from little towns to urban cities, or who have crossed national frontiers and migrated to European centers to find new opportunities of work, education, and life, that we observe the return to Islam. Contemporary Islam and its revival is closely related to the social mobility of Muslim groups. Their entry into life spheres of modernity in general, and to European societies in particular, activates a political return to Islam. Consequently, contemporary Islam is the outcome of a conflictual conversation with the premises of modernity. We need to privilege the description of the zones of contact, interaction, and friction between Islam and Europe. One can rightly object to these terms, since one cannot contrast a religion to a historical and geographical entity, on the one hand, and since Muslims are co-creating Europe, on the other. Yet the terms capture the tension between the two players as their relationship is shaped and expressed publicly. The nature of relations between Islam and Europe is not that of an encounter between two distinct and separate civilizations, but on the contrary, is wrought by proximity and interaction between the two. The public sphere is the site where the two-way, transversal, and conflictual aspects of the relation between Europe and Islam take place.

Islam is carried into public debates in Europe foremost by the religious claims of a new generation of Muslim migrants. Third-generation, young Muslims are distanced from their national cultures of origin and are more integrated than the previous generation into the culture of their host countries. Young Turkish migrants speak German, the Arab-origin Muslim migrants are instructed in French public schools, and both groups claim their French, German, or European citizenship. However, distancing oneself from one's country of origin and integration into one's host country do not necessarily imply assimilation to the cultural values of Europe. By means of reference to Islam, European Muslims of this new generation claim their religious difference as a source of self-affirmation but also as a source of social distinction and cultural confrontation with the European values of self and democracy. In making their religious difference visible to the European public eye, this newer generation engenders a series of public controversies on the place of religion and Islam in European democracies.

The question of gender in particular disturbs and becomes a prominent issue of dispute in this encounter. The "headscarf issue," carried by female members of the new generation of migrants in the French public schools, illustrates the ways in which the irruption of Islamic symbols in French public schools has triggered a nation-wide debate, not only on gender equality, but also on the French Republican notion of *laïcité*. The assassination of the Dutch intellectual Theo Van Gogh for a film he had produced with Hirsir Ali on Muslim women's submission, and the debate that followed in the Netherlands, have also brought to public attention the divide between those who defend equality between the sexes, individual freedom, and liberty of expression (Van Gogh) and those who define their identity in reference to Islamic values and religious faith (Van Gogh's assassin). In light of these examples, one can suggest that the questions raised by the presence of the immigrant Muslim population in Europe do not merely concern Muslims, but all European citizens and become part of a general and societal debate on

the cultural values of democracy. In this respect, the question of immigration becomes progressively a question that is perceived and framed in terms of religion, and specifically in terms of a religious and Islamic presence in Europe. The semantic change in naming this immigrant population indicates this shift as well; rather than putting the accent on the social qualification, such as “the migrant worker,” or on the national one, such as “Turks” in Germany or “Algerians” in France, or using the more general cultural attribute, such as “Arabs,” the religious attribute “Muslims in Europe” becomes widely used, if not over-determinate.

The discourse of integration therefore does not fully capture the changing nature of relations between European nations and Muslim migrants. The politics of integration supposes a predetermined frame of social institutions and public values to which the newcomers are expected to conform and assimilate. On the one hand, the established system and values are not fixed, but are in the process of being transformed by the entrance of new actors, groups, and idioms on the public scene. On the other hand, both French Republicanism and Dutch multiculturalism, as two different forms of integration, fall short of providing a successful frame for rethinking Islamic difference in European democracies. The French model of Republicanism promises equality of universal rights for individual citizens; but the voluntary secular “blindness” to religious difference and the fear of communitarian twists (seen as an Anglo-Saxon and American model to be avoided) risk leading to a politics of denial, where ethnic, cultural, and religious differences disappear, or where authoritarian attitudes towards Muslims manifest themselves. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, recognizes cultural pluralism and furthermore enhances a politics of difference, encouraging identity politics, but in the absence of a common frame of communication, interaction then turns into cultural avoidance. In this respect, both multiculturalism and universalism present two opposite sides of the same coin: both cultural avoidance and political denial end up with the relative failure of the integration of Muslims into Europe. My point here is not to engage in a debate on the issue of multiculturalism, but to introduce a reservation for those who condemn French universalism with the comfortable certainty that multiculturalism is the solution. One should recall that the two European countries that have voted against the referendum for the European constitution are France and the Netherlands. In spite of their strong traditions of Republicanism and multiculturalism, respectively, the two countries joined each other in defending their “national” cultural particularities against what they have perceived as a threat, whether it is defined as neo-liberalism, global economics, or Islamic values. However, I have to add as well that the political discourse on multiculturalism in Europe and the academic discourse of cultural relativism and postmodernity came to a halt, if not faded away altogether, in reaction to Islam, whereas Republican values and politics have seen revitalization in the French society of the last few years.

Carried into the forefront of public debate in Europe not only by new claims of Muslim minority groups, but also by means of Muslim-majority Turkey’s claims for membership in the European Union, Islam enters into the public life of European countries

setting a new public and political agenda. The controversy over Turkish membership in the European Union became a common preoccupation for European citizens and provoked a debate on the cultural and spiritual origins of European identity. Turkey presents herself as a secular Republican state—though she does not acknowledge a full separation between the state and religion, and attempts, on the contrary, to maintain state control over religion—and entails some commonalities with French *laïcité*: the principle of secularism was declared in the 1937 Constitution (compared to 1946 in France), and Turkey demonstrates a notion of *laïcité* (including the notion itself) in the regulation of public life, forbidding religious symbols and organizations from public schools and institutions. Turkey's ban of the Islamic headscarf from universities has provoked a nation-wide political debate since the post-1980 period. Turkey has been widely discussed in France—yet not in relation to secularism and Islam, but as the Other. The self-definition of Europeans needs difference to define itself against, whether this difference is defined in terms of geographic frontiers, cultural differences, or religious belief. Thus, a civilizational discord underpins the public discourse, and thereby transmits a feeling of reserve, if not reticence, in regard to Muslim Turkey's entrance. The Turkish candidacy has been a catalyst in revitalizing the debate on Europe and its identity, ironically evoking a reminder of the tacit equation between Europe's Christian religious heritage and values and European identity.²

The encounter between Europe and Islam calls for a critical re-examination of the coupled academic notions and their articulations that have accompanied this transformative process: European identity and project; the West and modernity; faith and identity; and lastly, *laïcité* and secularization.

Europe as an Identity or as a Project?

Islamic difference in Europe raises a major question regarding the future and definition of the European Union. Europe is made of diverse nation-states, but the European Union aims at a transnational unity beyond the nation-states and offers a new political frame for democratic rights and freedoms. Whether Europe will be defined as a particularistic identity or as a political project becomes a crucial question; for European citizens, there is no hiatus between the two. But the presence of Muslims reveals a tension between these two notions, because the definition of Europe as a particularistic (Christian) identity does not facilitate the creation of hyphenated identities between Europe and Islam. As Europeans turn towards the defense of their identity and cultural heritage, the European project suffers in its claims for pluralism. In other words, to the extent that European heritage becomes a source for the essentialization of European identity it undermines the universalistic claims of the project.

² This equation became more than tacit in the European Constitution debates, when reference to God and to the Christian heritage in the European Constitution was claimed by some European countries and rejected in the end by France-led secular European nations.

The End of the West?

The “end of the West” can be understood as a difficulty in identifying the project of modernity with the West. First, the fractures between the two Wests, European and American, become more apparent. Second, there is a divorce between the Western experience of modernity and its claims for universalism, namely the validity of the Western model of modernity in every cultural and historical context. The experience of modernity spread to peoples, regions, and cultures beyond the European and American context. This testifies to the success of the project, and such testimony lends itself to universal claims: modernity’s meanings will not be bound to a given particularistic religion, culture, or location. Yet the non-Western habitations of modernity are not copies of European and American models, and take different forms, twists, and interpretations. Hence, to embrace these different modernity narratives, the equation between Europe and civilization, between the West and the universal, becomes problematic; deconstruction of the Western universal is underway.

In a way, the Western experience of modernity suffers from its own success. The semantic shift in the self-presentation of the West illustrates this change as well. The European experience of modernity was identified with a universal “civilization” and not with a particular culture and religion. The debate over the notions of “civilization” and “*kultur*” that divided the French and German peoples during the nineteenth century ended with the victory of “civilization” over “*kultur*.” Today, however, the way the notion of civilization is used to underline Western cultural difference makes its meaning closer to the German *kultur*.

Faith and Identity

Religious faith has lost its institutional representative power but, as seen in younger Muslim generations, is becoming a new source for the definition of personal and collective identity. Islamic radicalism is not in continuation with religious orthodoxy, but, on the contrary, offers a new interpretation of religious texts in the light of criticism addressed to the modern world. We speak of the politicization of Islam to the extent that religious faith is turned into a public and collective identity; contemporary Islam voices a new articulation between religious faith and collective identity. We can put it the other way round as well: for a pious Muslim, religion is a matter of faith, not forcefully an identity. One is born into a given religion, and one becomes a pious person by learning norms, rituals, and traditions transmitted by family members, or by belonging to religious communities. Whereas one becomes an Islamist as a personal and collective choice—this is the politicization of Islam—one learns to become Islamic by means of a learning process and performative practices.

Laïcité and Secularization

The principle of *laïcité* is searching for ways of adaptation to the presence of Muslim migrants. The establishment of a representative council for the Muslim population (*Conseil Français de la Culte Musulmane*) marked a moment of public recognition for Islam as the second largest religion in France and a step toward creating a “French Islam.” The legislation to ban ostentatious religious signs, and in particular the headscarf from the public schools, expressed firmly the French commitment to the principle of *laïcité*, but also testified that the “Islamic veiling” is not confined to a Muslim nation, or to the Middle East region, but has also become an issue for the French public.

The principle of *laïcité* and the process of secularization are not interchangeable; the first is defined in relation to state will and legislation, whereas the latter describes a long-term process of the marginalization of religion, its privatization, and the “disenchantment” of modern daily life. The principle of *laïcité* was thought to be a “French exceptionalism” and therefore limited in its scope, whereas the process of secularization was depicted to be a universal trait of modernization. However, religious references in the regulation of matters concerning gender, life and death, and “bio-politics”—same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering and the critique of Darwinism—all illustrate cleavages between secular and religious sets of values (Muslim as well as Christian) in shaping modern life. In the contemporary context, religion enters into the public domain and competes with the process of secularization. It might be fruitful to rethink the principle of *laïcité* as a single secular law, providing a consensual judicial frame in a pluralistic context.

The confrontation between Islam and the West is not a confrontation between two different civilizations, or religions, but a confrontation between two different sets of cultural values, two different orientations toward modernity. Europe is becoming a central site where the conflictual encounter between these orientations, as embodied by Muslims and Europeans, is taking place, and public debates over Western definitions of self and society are intensifying. It is not in terms of two distinct entities—Islam and Europe—but in terms of zones of contact, interactions, and interpenetrations that one can frame the nature of this confrontation.³ The emergence of Islam in the European publics provokes a two-way relation that transforms not only Muslims and Europeans, but also the whole European project. Issues related to faith, religion, and secularism become decisive in debates on the values of modernity, in which we are witnessing the end of Western hegemony on the definitions of values of modernity. However, such a divorce between the West and the experience of modernity might undermine the latter as well.

³ Nilüfer Göle, *Interpenetrations: l'islam et l'europe* (Paris: Galaade, 2005).