

Debates Over How to Deal with Islam in Europe

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Since the 1980s, first the North European countries and then the countries with more recent immigration, such as Italy or Spain, have come to realise that immigration from Muslim countries is a long-lasting phenomenon. At the same time, a part of the Muslim population has pursued the course that it began in the 1970s, which consists of making Islam more visible, and institutionalising its culture within Europe. As an example, at the beginning of the twenty-first century the number of mosques and prayer-halls in the Western countries as a whole numbered 7,500,¹ which is significant for the importance of the classifying of populations according to their places of worship. If we estimate that the total number of European Muslims is about twelve million, this works out at one mosque per 1,600 Muslims. This is not strictly speaking an accurate figure, since it is relevant that only about a third of the population are practising Muslims, in particular amongst the adult male population. Bearing this fact in mind, the statistics equal one place of worship for every six hundred practising Muslims.

The Question of the Spokesperson

The places of worship are only one of the aspects connected to the attempts to

render Islam more institutionally and publicly visible in Europe: the issues of the teaching of Islamic religion, of Islamic schools, and of the festival of Aid el-Kebir and the sacrifice of the lamb, as well as that of *halal* food in hospitals, the army or in school canteens, or the family law, are a few of many others.

The institutional handling of all these aspects has led to the converging question, asked by States and the competent public authorities as well as by the Muslims themselves, of who are the representatives of the Muslims? Since the question of authority in Islam is not naturally engrained in the institutional thinking of the religion, the demand and the effort from both sides is channelled toward inventing a body that would be adequate to represent the Muslim people.

This institutional creation is the result of a type of exchange between the public authorities and the Muslim population, which could be set out in these terms: the State guarantees that the religion will be able to acquire a status and similar institutional and financial advantages comparable to those of other religions, and in turn, the people are bound to ensure a certain regulation of the Muslim community, especially regarding its extreme fringe. These advantages and status moreover differ very widely from one State to another, depending on the relationships that have been built up in the past between the States and the religions that have previously existed in their territory.²

Following the historic situation in Austria inherited from the Austro-Hungarian empire, and after the accords reached between the Spanish State and the Muslim community, we have witnessed the election in Belgium of the Higher Council of Muslims and in France, that of the French Council of the Muslim Faith, as well as the attempts to reach a similar arrangement in Italy. But even in countries where the situation has not progressed so far, the attempt by the public authorities to find a spokesperson may be seen everywhere. At the level of European institutions, although such organisations may not have a great deal of authority over religious matters (except in related questions deriving from them such as the free circulation of people, the slaughter of animals, and so forth), we can occasionally see clumsy bids to give form to a European-wide Islamic representation.

To give an idea of the current state of play, the following observations can be made:

Firstly, the efforts of Muslims can be seen on all sides, including on both a national and a European scale, to invent an official body according to the new guidelines that would represent the population as a collective in the eyes of the State and of public opinion. These efforts have so far failed, partly because of the very nature of the organisation of Islam itself. But these efforts demonstrate a slow and gradual progress that is leading to the convergence of the multiple types of Muslim

¹ Vide Felice Dassetto, J. Nielsen, B. Marechal, S. Allievi et al., *Muslims in Enlarged Europe. Religion and Society*, Leiden, Brill, 2003.

² Regarding the theoretical aspects, vide Dassetto F., *La construction de l'islam européen. Approche socio-anthropologique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996, p. 383. For a detailed analysis of the institutional relations between States, religions and Islam, vide Ferrari S., «The legal dimension», in Dassetto F., J. Nielsen, B. Marechal, S. Allievi et al., op. cit.

reality that can be found within European countries. The forms are differentiated by their vision of Islam, and also by their varying national and cultural traditions. The inexperience of the European understanding of Islam that these differences constitute is now starting to convert itself into an effort towards convergence. At the same time, there is also a search for new sources of legitimacy for these newly created authorities within Europe. So for example, we can witness the emergence – at the request of the member States, but without any underpinning reason – of the fact that these bodies should be legitimated by the electoral process. On a less formal scale, it is also being demanded that these authorities should be made up by fewer dignitaries and more religious leaders, who have been granted authority and who are acting by common consent, capable of functioning as the link between Muslims and the non-Muslim context – in particular between politics and the media.

At present States often see the need for quite considerable intervention in the process of supporting to these initiatives. It might be said that in existing cases, without the role of legitimating force, and sometimes that of controlling entity, adopted by States, these representative bodies would not exist at all.

And lastly it can be pointed out that the State's hopes to set a limit on the Muslim community and establish a control of its most radical groups – through those bodies – have resulted in failure. This desired function has proved impossible. On the other hand, it is true that involving some Muslims in the management of their religion does give them a sense of responsibility concerning the positions to be taken vis-à-vis the most radical fringes. But progress is very slow: after the attacks of 11th September, the Muslim representatives have admittedly made general expressions of condemnation, but have found it difficult to voice their position when confronted with the situation as it is observed among the members of their community.

The Return of the Veil

One of the headline issues that constantly recur in the handling of Islam

is that of the «Islamic veil». It was in 1988 that in the state *lycée* of Creil, in France, Muslim schoolgirls refused to take off their veils inside the school, a sign of their adherence to Islam. Coming up against the quite rigid secular ideology of Republican France, the veil issue broke out in a national controversy, and caused repercussions in numerous European countries. The debate sprang to life not only in schools, but also in numerous professional sectors, both public and private: in many cases, women who «wear a veil» are excluded from the job market. All this allows us to envisage, after the handling of the integration of a «transplanted» Islam in the 1970s and 1980s, how new debates are emerging in connection with Islam in an advanced phase of «establishment». We are aware that there are several reasons behind the insistent and ostentatious desire on the part of Muslim women to sport this veil, which serves as a symbol of Islam.

The question is that of the assertion of identity, which is often invoked: «I am Muslim, and I will say so.» Young women who are conscious of their identity must make a statement. At the same time, as with all adolescents, Muslim youth reacts against institutions, in this instance the educational ones, with the tools it has available to it – those of its own culture, which become all the more relevant in a world in which multiculturalism is valued.

But that is not all there is to it. In wearing the veil, perhaps these girls are also transmitting certain signals to their own community about their adherence to the religion. One such signal is that of the liberty they possess, for as Muslim women they can have freedom of movement, without being subject to the control, provocation, and persistent vigilance of the men who maintain control of the quarters where they live. Another is to assert this freedom, in the name of Islam, in the face of the arranged marriages that in certain cases are still imposed on them by their mothers and fathers in an upholding of tradition. Or again, to try and introduce certain rules of conduct in the places where they live, which their brothers and cousins seem incapable of respecting. And lastly, perhaps, to make themselves desirable, by being desir-

able in the sense of Islam. They are thus attempting to compete with the other non-Muslim women who have entered the marriage market and who are stealing their natural Muslims husbands, while according to religious law Muslim women may not marry outside their religion.

It could be said that these arguments only relate to sociological and anthropological questions, and that more fundamental issues of respect for religious law are more significant to the equation. That statement is true, and also constitutes a deep motivation that is worthy of the greatest respect: the acceptance of a religious obligation, which in secular societies is often despised or viewed with thinly veiled contempt.

However, it is important to add that this situation gives every impression of being an obligation shaped by new religious intellectual figures. It is not the obligation in general that is at issue, but rather a certain construction of it.

The right to wear the religious veil is also being demanded in educational establishments, public administration, and the workplace. And this, for the institutions, it is not merely a question of self-expression. Teachers are frequently left nonplussed and swamped in the invoked idealisms when confronted with these new demands. The fact is, it is hard to live the daily reality of multiculturalism, especially when it goes hand-in-hand with the natural problems of teenagers.

From the Veil to the Issue of Religion in the Public Sphere

However, there is one fact that European Muslims have not yet deigned to appreciate, and which bears with it all its implications. And that is that in Europe, especially in a multi-confessional Europe in an advanced phase of secularisation, a certain pact has been reached to publicly express religious belief with discretion. It is the pact of contemporary modern day society, made some fifty years ago. Admittedly, it is open to discussion, but in the knowledge that this discretion in public expression – of religion or of any collective identity – is also the condition for individual freedom. Moderation avoids

competition, rivalry, and confrontation. Multiculturalism and religious tolerance are therefore possible thanks to certain moderation. The great majority of Muslims appreciate the freedom with which they are able to pursue their religion in Europe. And they are right to do so. But they should not forget that moderation – theirs and everyone else's – is the condition for this freedom. It could be argued that these ideas do not take developments in post-modern society into account. The veil may be only one of several symbols. In the same way that we wear a T-shirt printed with a picture of Madonna, a frog, or the American flag, we could wear a veil. There is some truth in this interpretation, and Muslim fashion companies and shops that are being set up are in part proof of it. But at the same time, we should not impose too culturalist an interpretation on all these aspects. Identities and cultures are not just out there floating about – they do come from somewhere. This matter of clothing can be understood, and produced, as just another everyday cultural object. But some may interpret it as a significant matter of identity, others as a symbol of aggression, and for others it constitutes a firm signal of self-imposed isolation. These are the multiple dimensions that demonstrate the arduous labour of cross-cultural relations, perhaps even

of relations between civilisations, which are being carried out every day, in the slow step-by-step search for the appropriate road map.

From the Management to the Maturing of Islam

The veil issue, in the same way as the issue of institutional management, gives us a glimpse of one of the greatest challenges in the future of European Islam: that of the presence of executives and qualified leaders. Muslim leadership was initially provided by the first wave of immigrants and political refugees, but new migrations and the arrival of new Islamic leaders continue to add to the pool of leadership. The 1990s saw the emergence of the first leaders from within the European immigrant community, who are young people, often self-educated, who have become conscious of their adherence to Islam, who have felt a sense of responsibility for the future of their community and in particular for the younger generations, and who have therefore become the driving force behind an Islam that is increasingly making its place in Europe. In addition to these leaders, for several years now there have been Europeans (of immigrant descent or converts) on the scene who have received their education in Saudi or other Islamic univer-

sities. These people, true professionals and well read in Islam, sometimes convey an Islam marked by Saudi Wahhabism, a strict and literalist branch.

In short, the path for the education of European leaders of Islam is far from being clearly defined and the emergence of an educated Muslim executive class, fully integrated into the European context, will be a decisive challenge in the years to come.

The difficulty is that today, apart from a few private initiatives, there is no creation of structured and solid institutions. If a young Muslim wishes to pursue a well-grounded course in Islamic studies, with rare exceptions, he or she will experience great difficulty to find anywhere in Europe to undertake such study.

This lack of intellectuals, and of solidly educated executives is a major deficiency: just at the time when European Islam must take a new look at the direction its Europeanism is taking, and just when it must establish its position in relation to the major worldwide currents in Islam, and to the powers that drive it, just when it must face the emergence of a radical Islam from within Europe, this absence is making itself felt, in spite of the generosity of many Muslims.

The future of the management of European Islam could depend on the emergence of these leaders.