Making Public Space: Opportunities and Limits of Collective Action Among Muslims in Europe

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Recent research suggests that the settling of Muslims in secular Europe is leading to the individualisation of their religious identity and to the fragmentation of their social life. Such research purports to show the production of a specific ‘European’ Islam that eludes the traditional authority in which Islam is allegedly still mired in most Muslim majority societies. This paper considers the predicament of Muslims in Europe from a different perspective, through a consideration of the ambivalence of secular norms of the public sphere and of their limits in dealing with religious expressions. While much of the current literature concentrates on the diasporic and transnational aspects of the Muslim presence in Europe, the focus here is on specifically European and post-colonial dimensions. The institutional sedimentation of historic traumas, rather than universal values, specific to the formation of European societies and public spheres are considered in both their internal-metropolitan and external-colonial articulations. Set against these original characteristics of European public spheres, an analysis is offered of some of the most vocal activism, particularly that of Muslim women and youth, as instances of a struggle to transform and enrich, and even to decentre, European public spheres.

Keywords: Europe; Islam; Secularism; Socio-Religious Movements; Public Sphere

Introduction

It is often asked whether Muslim communities can really adjust to Europe. The question is more rarely raised as to whether the institutions and ideologies of Europe can adjust to a modern world of which culturally diverse immigrants are an integral part. Europeans were, after all, ready to change their attitudes to accommodate Jewish communities with an unprecedented respect (Asad 1997: 194).
Islam has assumed an iconic status in European public spheres as demonstrated by, among others, the Rushdie Affair in the United Kingdom, the *affaire des foulards* in France, and the public campaign unleashed in the Netherlands in the wake of the homophobic statements made by the Moroccan *imam* El-Moumni in the summer before 11 September 2001. Disputes about Islam and Muslims may have taken on a racialised vocabulary in the United Kingdom but similar disputes on the continent, though certainly not devoid of racist overtones, have been somewhat different. There, the secularly minded stigmatise ‘insurgent Islam’ as a kind of anti-modern mobilisation. Many perceive Islam less as the backward culture of the ‘other’ than as a ‘return to the Middle Ages’, an egregious form of authoritarianism lacking the clear separation between religion and politics. Public disputes about Islam and Muslims have revived ghosts from Europe’s past. In fact, they have exposed the fragility of the formulas of cultural and civic integration inherited from the history of socio-political governance in Europe.

In the 1990s, European integration was advanced at an institutional and administrative level with the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties, the accession of more countries to the European Union, and preparations for the launch of the Euro. In spite of these advances at a political and economic level, there has been a crisis of trust. As Europe searched for formulas for cultural cohesiveness, we witnessed the implosion and slow death of the first wave of American-style multiculturalism, which was based on naive notions of coexistence and soft interaction among different cultures. The present study considers Islam in Europe from the viewpoint not only of groups and individuals who attach varying degrees of significance to their being Muslim while also claiming residency and citizenship rights in Europe, but also of what issues related to Islam have revealed in terms of the inherent aporias of norms regulating exchange and communication within European public spheres.

Muslims’ inclusion and integration, if not into European societies then at least into European public spheres, are a subject of concern for many researchers. However, Islam must not be taken for granted, treated as culturally singular or a politically dependent variable in the ‘Euro-Islam’ equation. Rather, it must be seen as a complex tradition in a continual state of transformation. Moreover, the complex intersection of European and Islamic political spaces, which cannot be reduced to their component parts (individual citizens or residents, NGOs, legal and political representatives, administrative branches, etc.) must be taken into consideration.

The risk of essentialism entailed in this approach is worth taking if the goal is to avoid making social analysis hostage to the categories of administration and governance. The antidote to essentialism is to look at the parallel and dialectically intersecting genealogies of Muslim traditions and European public spheres, through which it might finally appear that they define socio-political spaces in the making, characterised by strong imbalances of power more than by essential ideological, cultural and civilisational barriers. The complexity of these socio-political spaces can only be assessed by looking at the colonial and post-colonial crystallisation of different and sometimes conflicting ways of situating ‘religion’ within socio-political processes and by analysing the underlying co-ordinates of authority and power.
The Reconstruction of Muslim Traditions

For neither Muslim majority societies nor Muslim minorities in Europe is it possible to talk about a sudden ‘coming out’ of Muslims. Instead, the longer history of reform, renewal or even ‘awakening’ of Muslim traditions variously entangled with colonialism, decolonisation, nation-state building, and class and gender relations in both their internal-metropolitan and external-colonial articulations should be investigated (Höfert and Salvatore 2000). The intensification of inter-generational conflict and the pace of migration have further complicated such processes in the post-colonial era.

The configuration of social relations affecting the reform process is complex and varies according to context and situation. The dynamics of reform cannot be reduced to structural transformations within society. One has to consider the search for the coherence of traditions conceived as congruous and dynamic, though often unstable, ensembles of discourses and arguments governing actual social practice. The reform impulse lies in the collective effort to redress and improve the stock of practical and theoretical knowledge that allows for the pursuit of social and transcendent goods defined as central by a given tradition. However, social processes and any underlying conflicts (especially around class and gender) produce and reproduce social power and related hegemonic forms, thereby influencing the extent of the success or failure of attempts at reform.

The most dynamic core of a tradition resides not in codified procedures or established institutions but at a sociologically more complex level that is produced by the ‘living tradition’ and nurtured by practices and underlying dispositions. These cannot be the exclusive object of formal training but are embedded in life narratives. They presuppose not simply a quest for identity but a collective *telos* of action that is necessarily transindividual and transgenerational and is usually projected into some formula of ‘common good’ (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004). Theologically, the Islamic *umma* includes all Muslims but it retains some degree of concreteness in that the ‘other’ is first of all one’s neighbour whom the faithful consider, or, if necessary, help to become, a good Muslim. It is through this micro-link, which often takes the form of moral discourse, that the *umma* is instituted.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1988: 349–69) stresses that ‘tradition’ is an eminent part of the motivational prism of the social agent. Viewed this way, tradition is close to the Wittgensteinian concept of *Lebensform* or life form. The use of this concept of tradition here is due to the need to highlight the link between the grass-roots level of practice and the dimension of governance and stratification that creates and reproduces authority. Authority so defined is placed in the hands of ‘guardians’ of the tradition and is essentially contestable and contested through shifting socio-political configurations of state power, class and gender, as well as through inter-generational change.

Such an approach to tradition helps to avoid seeing Islamically-inspired social action as little more than an instance of the current ‘politics of identity’. The latter would seem to fit with a post-modern notion of the public sphere in which Muslims
‘come out’ from the private realm under pressure from authoritarian and patriarchal dominance into the public sphere whose borders are patrolled by the secular state. The politics of identity would posit Islamic identity markers as fixed when under the control of authoritarian patriarchs or as fluid and disposable when internal and external barriers are broken and Muslims enter the ‘free’ arena of public exchange. The implication of such an approach would be that religious symbols might be used for non-religious goals via the appropriation and use of a wide range of media and discourses, and that authority becomes fragmented through such a secular, identity-oriented, use of religious discourse. Against such a simplified, post-modern view of the ‘coming-out’ of Muslims (Göle 1996), the adoption of the notion of tradition and the analysis of the ongoing process of its reform or reconstruction shows that Islamic traditions (i.e. their discourses and institutions, as well as the practices they authorise) have been subjected to permanent interventions since their inception. However, these interventions must be authorised and the procedures of authorisation are subject to ever-deeper changes related to the dynamics of social processes related to class, gender and generation. Change and reform do not erase authority but redistribute it and might change its nature.

A key moment in the transformation of procedures for the authorising of discourse among Muslims is the project of reform that was developed during the second half of the nineteenth century in the major centres of the Ottoman Empire. Muslim reformers, including public intellectuals, educators and government advisors, re-examined traditional forms of Islamic reasoning in order to promote education, collective welfare, economic development and public morality. This project of Islamically-inspired reform generated interpretations, associations and media in the context of colonisation, the crisis and demise of the Ottoman Empire, decolonisation, and nation-state formation. Nonetheless, the public intellectuals of Islamic reform were not simply the pawns of the nation-state. They influenced educational and legal policies while also producing a distinctive view of Muslim morality. Thereafter, a whole spectrum of differentiated (and often competing) personalities, groups and movements, inspired by reform blueprints (Arabic islah), contributed to the redefinition and collective pursuit of moral and social goods that went well beyond the secularly-minded delimitation of religious practice centred on belief and basically located in the private sphere. Thus, the reformers’ intervention in Muslim traditions within a functionally modern public sphere via the press, public lectures, discussion circles, clubs and new charitable associations did not collapse traditional notions of the self, community and authority into the modern model of personal responsibility (as reflected in civil law) and loyalty to the nation-state (Asad 2003: 205–56; Gasper 2001). On the whole, Islamic reform kept a fair degree of indeterminacy towards the legitimacy of the secular kernel of the modern state, i.e. its claim to a monopoly of allegiance and the instruments of reward and punishment.

From the outset, gender was also a major axis of planned reform, most notably the education of girls from different social classes. The focus on gender redeemed the class divisiveness of the discourse. The main result was the notion of the ‘good Muslim woman’, later re-articulated, under different social and historical circumstances,
within the movement of the ‘new veiling’ that began to be publicly visible in Egypt and elsewhere, including Europe, from the first half of the 1970s onwards. As Abu-Lughod (1999: 28) argued:

it was not insignificant that the ‘new’ wife and mother was now to be in charge of the scientific management of the orderly household of the modern nation, as well as the rearing and training of the children who now were seen as the future citizens of the modern nation.

Since the crisis in the nationalist-developmentalist project in the late 1960s, new conditions have fostered such discourse and the concomitant attempt to reconstruct the role of the Muslim woman as pivotal to a community’s ethos whose telos is Muslim ‘good life’. Since the 1970s the main outwardly visible sign of this reconstruction has been the ‘new veiling’.

To understand women’s reasons for donning the veil, or headscarf, one has to look beyond mere discourse. The decision to wear one is usually taken in stages and often consciously or even autonomously, in spite of general social pressure and pressure particularly from other women in the family or the workplace, or from fiancé and spouses. Other factors frequently include the need for paid work, the lack of income for buying and wearing expensive middle-class attire, and pressure not to be exposed to the ‘temptations of life’. This new veiling has been interpreted as ‘accommodating protest’, a notion that stresses its contradictory but also active character (MacLeod 1991). Among Muslim women in Europe, veiling retains this ambivalence. Nevertheless, the potential intervention in Muslim traditions and the simultaneous contestation of the public sphere are more pronounced in Europe than in Muslim majority societies, and the European politics of the veil represents this complexity well.

Contested Borders in European Public Spheres

The previously-mentioned affine des foulards occurred in France first in 1989 and was replicated in that country and elsewhere in Europe throughout the 1990s. Today the French government retains an official ‘mediator for national education on the issue of the Islamic veil’ amidst never-ending cases of school directors preventing young women from being veiled at school, while a national poll in June 2003 showed that 53 per cent of the French were against the wearing of headscarves in public spaces. In contrast to this trend in France, in September 2003 the Constitutional Court in Germany stated that there were no constitutional obstacles to a muhajaba (a woman with a headscarf, or hijab), who was employed as a teacher, wearing her veil during classes.

The iconic power of the veil relates to the fact that the secularly trained eye perceives the way it crosses, whether intentionally or not, the well-entrenched border between private and public spheres as the epitome of the essential threat of Islam in Europe. Indeed, many perceive it as a de facto tool of proselytising or at the very least as a symbolic colonisation of the public space, which is supposed to be free of religion. The preoccupation with veiling in both scholarly and journalistic accounts can be
interpreted as resulting from the perception that such a symbol contaminates the secular sacrality of public space. Indeed, the veil is a figurative ‘fist in the eye’ of the average citizen, the state administrator, as well the journalist and scholar. In the words of the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, Muslims ought ‘to leave their cultural backgrounds at home’ once they enter the public sphere (Amir-Moazami 2001: 309).

From the viewpoint of the guardians of European public spheres, the entry of Muslim traditions into these spheres starts with the question of optical perception and idiosyncratic reaction. This has led some scholars to simplify the analysis into an issue of ‘visibility’, considered the final token of ‘publicity’ (Göle 1996), through a mechanistic reversal of paradigms of ‘invisible religion’ (Luckmann 1967). The issue of the entry of Muslim traditions into European public spheres is, nonetheless, more complex than a mere ‘visibilisation’ and must be understood in relation to the history of the European formulas for the separation of religion and politics, and private and public spheres. The intersection of these two codes of separation that were essential to the formation of nation-states is in the administrative delimitation of a religious field and its subjection to state monitoring. With the separation of private and public spheres, religion was barred from the latter but was considered constitutive of the ‘inner forum’ of man, that is, the moral engine of the private sphere.

Tension and compromises between religious communities, confessions and institutions, on the one hand, and the rising nation-states, on the other, have been constitutive of modern European societies since the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, the so-called Wars of Religion, during and after the age of the great revolutions, as well as in the colonial era. The variety of institutional arrangements resulting from these ongoing relations, and ranging from the factual, though non-institutional separation of the Anglican Church and the state in Britain to the radical implementation of the laïcité principle in France, are inscribed in the social and legal charters of the various European societies, and inform contemporary notions of the public sphere. While some have made a distinction between the ‘friendly’ and the ‘conflicted’ approach to the separation of religious and political spheres (Linz 1996) in Western Europe, the increasing definition of European nation-states along cultural-linguistic lines required a metabolisation and incorporation of the ethical kernel of religion as a generator of trust and responsibility in secular forms of solidarity in society. This process is well reflected in the normative aspects of Durkheim’s sociology. Even if one takes this formula as the specific basis for a French or continental model, it has been matched by the British approach in which the moral and missionary élan of reformed Christianity became a key to domestic and colonial ‘civilising projects’. In the words of the nineteenth-century British Prime Minister Gladstone, ‘[t]he State is properly and according to its nature, moral … religion is directly necessary to the right employment of the energies of the State’ (quoted in van der Veer 1999: 23–4).

Through a close fit with the logic of the rise of power and control via nation-state institutions, the principle of the religious neutrality of the state, which is valid within limits, even in the French republican case where laïcité is partly a product of specific developments among the liberal currents of Catholicism, was often pushed forward by
non-conformist and non-established religious groups. This heritage is today reflected in the attitude of those Muslim groups, such as Turkish associations in Germany, that complain that the religious neutrality of the state is only applied to established churches, while Muslim groups are placed outside this framework.

While the diversity of national trajectories and arrangements testifies to different solutions and fields of tension, the common result of all these processes, and one of the reasons for the category of the ‘European nation-state’, is that state institutions have delegitimised any pretension of religious authorities impinging directly on the political process and have, therefore, gained, in various relations of collaboration and compromise with the religious confessions and their representatives, a legally pinpointed control of the ‘religious field’, which is transformed in ‘one of the fields of disciplinary practice in which the modern civil subject is produced’ (van der Veer 1999: 19). The fact that the practice of religion has been incorporated in a field with clearly delimited borders at least towards the political system and the state institutions, a domain confined to the private sphere plus a limited range of Church ‘community’ activities, is one of the main markers of the successful emergence of nation-states in Europe.

A radical interpretation of the modern transformations of religion in Europe goes as far as assigning religious institutions and especially those churches that were ‘established’ by their deals with the states to the state-dominated social space. Religious institutions are considered as playing an ambivalent function as providers of morality to society as a whole (Zylberberg 1990). Religious personnel are turned into the moral prefects of the nation, whereby the counterpart to state domination is, according to other interpretations (Casanova 1994), the autonomy of actors in the religious field, whenever they operate within its proper boundaries, even if this is a mutilated autonomy due to a limited control of resources. The presupposition of the scheme is that religious authorities accept these boundaries, and limit and internalise the resulting constraints. However, while the institutional and legal principle of separation is clear, its implementation is far more ambiguous. A rigid application of the principle would indeed provoke the social paralysis of religious groups, since all social activities can be interpreted as having at least an implicit political potential. And religious communities are of course formed for complex social, not merely psychological, reasons. As the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Spinoza saw it, religion is grounded in prophecy as an imaginative and parabolic discourse trying to bring the ethical ideas of justice and the imperative to perform good deeds (caritas in Christian discourse) into harmony with the practical needs of the common people, thereby grounding the very notion of the common good.

Even more basically, religiously-inspired action thematises the relationship of the subject to different levels of otherness and tries to regulate the relationship in the name of the imperatives of service. In this sense, religious discourse helps transcend primordial community allegiances and structures the building blocks of social ties. With Muslim aggregations still often defined along ethnic or national lines (as in the division between Turkish and Moroccan mosques in the Netherlands), it would be probably premature to announce a pan-European homogenisation and simplification
of approaches to Islam (Allievi 2003). It is true, however, that the movement itself of entry into European public spheres makes the raising of the banner of Islam a tool for overcoming narrow community loyalties. As Werbner (1998) has shown, this is precisely what happened when Muslims in Britain took to the streets to protest against *The Satanic Verses*. They demonstrated that they were not only the sum of a number of fractured diasporas but that they were able to raise larger claims for justice and representation.

The fact that religious leaders, in actively formulating the ‘common good’, do not always play the role of docile moral prefects of the nation, creates perennial problems in the policing of the borders between religion and politics and the private and the public spheres. While states have always welcomed and used the ‘charity’ services of religious institutions, these activities had to be purely charitable in order not to threaten the legitimacy and prestige of the state as the ultimate guarantor of the public interest. The state’s repression of any misuse of funds earmarked for charity might go well beyond its declared goal and become the first instrument of monitoring and even repression of religious groups, as the cases of several Muslim groups, not only in Europe, even before 9/11 illustrate. The institutionalisation of the separation of religion and politics is inevitably fragile, generating new conflicts, ongoing pressures on both sides and, in optimal cases, renegotiations of border arrangements.

It is not surprising that the basic ways through which European social theory, the social imagery more generally and the sociology of religion in particular have related religious traditions to the public sphere come from the traumatic experience of religious discord and religious wars in early modern Europe and the subsequent nationalist wars from the eighteenth century through to the Second World War. In short, religion is considered legitimate in the public sphere if it fosters an ethical stance and helps to bridge boundaries between closed communities. Religion is considered a negative factor when it reinforces communalism (read fundamentalism). In this long-term traumatic modern experience with religion, the Protestant Reformation was the factor that triggered religious divisions and follow-up wars, while the Protestant ethic in an expanded (and trivialised) Weberian sense, as a professional ethic of the ‘calling’ divorced from belief, is seen as the key to the solution through secularism. The trauma was less pronounced in England where religious dissent was regulated earlier than on the continent and the lack of separation between church and state was to provide a permanent institutional axis around which all subsequent arrangements of separation of ‘spheres’ were supposed to gravitate. This thesis of the legitimisation of separate spheres can be made more ecumenical. For example, the sociologist of religion José Casanova has expanded it to show that Catholicism in its manifold expressions has been able, after the Second Vatican Council, to produce a comparable ‘legitimate’ kind of religion committed to modern values of solidarity and cohesion. This is a programme for the modernisation of Catholicism that is attractive for the possible ‘normalisation’ of Islam (see Casanova 2001).

However, if we look at relations between religious traditions and the public sphere before the modern period or from outside Europe, there is no compelling reason to be conceptually tied to the same view of religion as good only if it helps overcome discord
and moralises public life. Such a restricted interpretative framework no longer makes sense. There is a potential legitimacy of religious traditions in the modern world even if they do not fit the straightjacket set by mainstream Western social theory.

In Western Europe, the history and experience of colonialism has been the main agent of the view of Islam as an essentially inferior civilisation, or at least as a culture in a state of either infancy or decadence deep enough to justify civilising missions by Europeans, religious or otherwise. While most Muslims in Eastern Europe and the Balkans represent the living heritage of the Ottoman Empire on European soil, most Muslims in Western Europe today are migrants or the children or grandchildren of migrants from former European colonies, semi-colonies, or the successor states of those parts of the Ottoman Empire situated outside the European continent. Their presence also bears a relation to the wider genealogy of religiously inspired violence in Europe. This violence, whether spontaneous or organised, which developed in the first phase of the process of the metamorphosis of religion in the early modern era, especially during the so-called Wars of Religion, was the consequence of the dissolution of the unity of the Catholic Church and the establishment, through subsequent waves ranging well into the twentieth century, of reformed, evangelical, pentecostal, neo-pentecostal, and ‘charismatic’ groups and denominations. However, the greatest potential for violence against communities identified primarily in religious terms, though this identification also encompassed a view of ethnic difference often linked with increasingly racial and racist theories, occurred in the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth centuries. The main targets have been communities of the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam. The Jewish Holocaust and the beginnings of genocide against Bosnian and Albanian-Kosovar Muslims are the two main cases of organised violence of frightening proportions, justified in terms of Christian or non-Christian, certainly European identity discourses. The racial and religious dimensions that added to the ‘civilisational’ justifications of colonial wars waged by European powers against predominantly Muslim populations in Africa and Asia provide an additional legacy to this genealogy of religiously motivated violence in and by Europe.

**Individualisation vs. Collective Action**

This complex genealogy is given short shrift in some recent literature, which asserts that the settling of Muslims in Europe, particularly the second and third generations of migrants, contributes to the individualisation of religious identity and the fragmentation of forms of social organisation. The main argument in this strand of the literature is that there is a specific ‘European’ Islam that eludes the traditional authority in which Islam is allegedly still mired in Muslim majority societies. However, such approaches rely upon a negative concept of religious tradition and a one-dimensional understanding of the public sphere. The approach adopted here tries to evidence the analytic importance of a positive notion of religious traditions and a complex conceptualisation of the public sphere, while in much of the literature the transformative potential of Muslim traditions is underestimated in relation to both
family-related ‘life-worlds’ and within the public spheres in which Muslims operate and raise demands for public representation.

In one variant of this argument, the liberal, democratic values in Western European public spheres provide the ground for drastic changes in Muslim thought and practice, leading to a version of Islam with a specific European normative base, ‘Euro-Islam’ (Tibi 1998, 2000). Such an argument only legitimises this particular model of Islam, which is oriented towards an ‘enlightened European system of values’ in harmony with ‘secular constitutions’, as Bassam Tibi puts it (2000: 36). A second variant of a Europeanised Islam (e.g. Babès 1997; Khosrokhavar 1997; Roy 1998; Saint-Blancat 1997; Tietze 2001) places the emphasis on the plural and changing character of Muslim forms of organisation and social life in Europe within the context of the encounter with secularised Western societies: the ‘individualisation of religion’.

By stressing how Muslims’ social actions are context-dependent, the second variant improves substantially on the former, in terms of sociological categorisation and analysis (this is further examined in Salvatore and Amir-Moazami 2002). Nonetheless, it tends to overestimate the fluidity of the relation between tradition and social action. The assumption of fluidity is tied to the presumed erosion or fragmentation of Muslim traditions when faced with late-modern or post-modern variants of identity construction and claims-raising in the public sphere, the kind of politics of identity mentioned at the beginning of this article. One can observe how the widely shared fear of essentialising the ‘other’ amongst scholars of Islam has led to a tendency pre-emptively to normalise it, pointing out that Muslims are capable of integration into European societies, if only exposed to the normal mechanisms of social solidarity and discipline that are essential to European society or, in other words, as long as they are not exposed to extra-European forms of militancy or the rejection of democratic values. This approach also shows that the fear of essentialising Islam produces an essentialisation of Europe’s socio-political ‘normality’.

This second strand of recent literature can be considered as part of a larger sociological approach that claims, contrary to Habermas’s classic view of the public sphere, that identities do matter for public participation, and that all identities, including religious ones, are a legitimate platform for individuals and citizens to raise claims, on condition that they do not impinge on the identities and liberties of other citizens. In her study of young Muslim men in France and Germany, Nikola Tietze (2001: 294) writes that ‘the identification with Islam becomes an ordinary means, one among many, for the construction of subjectivity’. Treating Islam like any other facet of individual choice displaces the role Muslim traditions have in the early socialisation of the individual. The problem is to evaluate whether Muslim traditions, such as fasting during Ramadan, can be reduced to a belief-centred ‘Muslim religiosity’, completely absorbed into a universe of preferences and individual choice. Tietze’s central premise is a politics of meaning that superimposes an allegedly traditional continuity within religious practice between bodily disciplines and gestures and their ‘spiritual sense’. Change is attributed to the particular social situation of young Muslims in Europe for whom it is now normal to fast outside of one’s community network and to celebrate the end of the fasting period without having fasted.
themselves. In Tietze’s view, such change is due to the process of giving meaning to fasting, now largely detached from actual practice, something that amounts to a culturalisation of Ramadan, that is, its dissociation from religious obligations.

The idea of a bifurcation between believing and belonging is the result of what Tietze and other sociologists of religion in Europe (e.g. Davie 1990) identify in processes of rationalisation of religious traditions (centred on the distinction between the ‘inner forum’ and public commitment) as well as of secularisation. This formula promises the individualisation of religious belief and the neutralisation of the dangers of communitarian politics. Assuming a decline in the importance of religious institutions in Europe, being religious from this perspective is in the first instance a matter of individual choice, a token of autonomy from religious authorities and traditions. One can object to such a simplified interpretation given the multiplicity of modalities of belonging to a religious tradition. On the one hand, any assumption of an inherent difference between Islam and other religions and their communities in Europe is based on the obsolete view of a ‘transplanted’ Islam. On the other, the specific and diverse character of socio-political contexts in European societies favours particular continuities and discontinuities but also the reform and reconstruction of Muslim traditions, not their erasure, as in the new debates over whether there should be specific forms of fiqh and Islamic law for the European context (see Bowen supra).

Closer inspection reveals strong activity at reconstructing living traditions and a concomitant shifting configuration of authority in which, for example, women and youth acquire and transform authority but where authority is not obliterated (Amir-Moazami 2001; Nökel 2002). This is different from the idea of a free-floating, deliberately chosen religious identity. Recognising this raises the question of whether it is feasible to categorise the cultural appropriation of traditions by the Muslim youth exclusively through a post-Protestant dichotomy between spiritual choice and unreflected orthopraxis, as Tietze and others seem to do.

Far from grasping the normal way for Islam to become part of the public sphere in the era of new social movements, such one-dimensional models of individualisation impoverish the complexity of factors at stake in Muslims’ appropriation of public space. Let us consider the most iconic token of Islamic identity, i.e. veiling, in the form of a public statement. As Amir-Moazami (2001) has shown, contingent and tactical uses of the veil are only possible in relation to a certain, however contested, living tradition, and they are neither a strictly individual choice nor the marker of an exclusive Muslim subjectivity. Tietze’s diagnosis of the normalisation of Muslim traditions into factors of self-formation in Europe neglects the ongoing contestation of theorems of separation propagated by public opinion makers considering public manifestations of Muslim religiosity. The frequent answer to these reassertions of secular orthodoxy is not a hybridisation of identities (French, Muslim), intended as bricolage and narcissistic display, but a laborious and daily work of reconstructing viable strategies of survival in settings characterised by tensions between different cultures or traditions, and even more between the state’s monitoring and educating function and the partial autonomy of socio-religious actors. These strategies are analysed in the parallel investigations of Schirin Amir-Moazami and Sigrid Nökel on
young Muslim women in France and Germany (Amir-Moazami 2001; Nökel 2001, 2002), and by the research of Nadia Hashmi (2000) on Muslim youth in the United Kingdom and France. In her work on young daughters of labour migrants, Nökel (2001: 131) ascertains that school is the main arena of identity-formation for young Muslim women in Germany. At school they learn and internalise the techniques of self-creation and self-assertion transmitted by public education. The result of the process is frequently the ‘creation of a female Islamic actor, overcoming boundaries and deconstructing essentialization, compelled and empowered by the rules of public spaces and discourses, but at the same time subordinating herself to these rules’ (2001: 145).

Muslim actors have to cope with the dominant culture based on a notion of cultural-linguistic homogeneity of the nation and a ‘culture of separation’ between religion and politics, the private and the public spheres, which are incorporated into political-legal avatars of national citizenship. Therefore, it is correct to speak of ‘multiple’ or ‘compromising identities’ (see Salih supra) to the extent that the actors do not dilute essential components but revitalise them through their contacts or conflicts with other elements of identity. As Werbner (1998: 24) stated, ‘more than anything, identities constitute subjective narratives of virtue and moral commitment’. The definition of tradition proposed earlier returns: multiple identities can only be viable in the context of living traditions that often entail, in the case of Muslims in Europe, a dialogic though conflicted effort ‘to draw on Islam to articulate an Other-oriented view of individual and society’ (Werbner 1998: 27).

Decentring European Public Spheres?

Today, cultural dialogue and hybridisation of the logic of action (wherever possible) are only viable as part of an enrichment and elaboration, however conflict-laden, of the public sphere in a manner that does justice to the situation generated by the presence of Muslim citizens and communities within European societies. This redefinition of spaces of voluntary action, association and speech would not merely benefit the lives of Muslim citizens but also the long-term vitality of European polities. In a sense, this call for hybridising the notion of the public sphere, for making it accessible to a logic of collective action that Casanova (1994) defined as ‘public religion’, would make obsolete the much-cherished and much-criticised goal of a cultural ‘integration’ of Muslims in Europe. A truly democratic and dialogic public sphere cannot rely solely on the disciplining instruments, like education, the law and non-selective policing, through which the nation-state forcefully integrates cultural and religious minorities.

More analytical attention needs to be paid to the sociological dimension of conflict and mobilisation before considering coexistence and cohesion as the sole ingredients of the recipe to integration, which always presupposes a majority culture into which a minority is integrated (Asad 2003: 159–80). Talal Asad rightly claims that the notion of minority itself is the product of a specific European history of religious conflict and has never been successfully reabsorbed by the secular idea of citizenship. Citizenship
always relies on the essential characteristics of a majority culture or cultural-linguistic unit—French republican, British, etc. —and therefore determines cultural closure at least as much as it promises to integrate newcomers. Therefore,

Muslim immigrants … are included and excluded from Europe at one and the same time in a special way, and … this has less to do with the ‘absolutist Faith’ of Muslims living in a secular environment and more with European notions of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ and ‘the secular state’ (Asad 2003: 159).

Veiled women provide just one example, though one obsessively emphasised by European majority cultures, of more complex processes in which majority–minority relations intersect gender conflict and inter-generational struggle. Family networks and custom-based versions of Islam encounter the increasingly reflexive and critical views that the younger generation advances, usually under the label of an authentic Islam (Mandaville 2003). Werbner argued that the first stage of empowering women has often been the reconstruction of networks of inter-domestic exchange, which have been dissolved in the migration process. Thus, the reclaiming of public space cannot follow the classic lines of civic virtue and public responsibility premised on a rigid dichotomy between the private and public spheres, a model strongly entrenched in European societies but one which is also congenial to patriarchal and custom-based forms of Islamic authority. This agonic confrontation is entailed both in the simultaneous process of contesting authority in Muslim traditions within patriarchally dominated domestic spheres and of questioning official dogmas concerning the nature of the public sphere. This type of agonic action should not be seen negatively, since it formatively contributes to the emergence of new forms of Islamically-inspired voluntary activism.

More specifically, the politics of claiming the authenticity of an Islam purified of customs and other cultural accretions serves to further fragment traditional sources of authority, such as mosque-based imams and parents, to the extent that the locus of the authentic Islam and the identity of those who are permitted to speak on its behalf are becoming elusive. The comparatively strong social power of some components of the youth, including women, with their networks and social interactions, familiarity with its intellectual avatars and political tools and, above all, a mastery of the dominant languages of European societies, has reinforced this tendency. Traditional sources of authority are not necessarily or always directly attacked but are being challenged by the internal tool-kits of arguments and disputation that are part of the tradition. The modest success, when not outright failure, of patriarchal authority to solve a fast-expanding range of problems related to how to live a coherent and good Muslim life under new social conditions in Europe also creates spaces of opportunity for other forms and styles of leadership that benefit women and youth.

The limited capacity of a tradition to become part of different social fields such as school, peer groups, leisure-time activities and associational life can trigger an attempt either to reject or to revitalise the tradition’s argumentative and symbolic resources. The increased involvement of women in such areas of public life provides them with tools to struggle against male dominance and differential treatment in the family.
Here, Islam can become a means to a critique of custom, the religion that prescribes equality in front of God, regardless of gender. The most relevant aspect in which ‘equality before God’ is transposed to daily life is the demand for the religiously sanctioned right to accumulate knowledge through education, which is not limited to the domestic sphere. In fact, this implies involvement in public life, as in study, work, voluntary association, public campaign, or even protest.

This ongoing test of incorporating Muslim traditions into European public spheres has created a permanent uncertainty as to juridical solutions concerning the legitimacy of the veil in public educational institutions, as seen in the contradictory jurisprudence of various European states. The variety and open-endedness of processes of redefinition of Muslim traditions in Europe are destined to remain laden with conflict. Hybrid forms of social agency can be observed, not in the sense of hybridising any predefined ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ cultural and normative assets but through the development of original and complex forms of interaction. A crucial element in shaping interaction is the role of public authorities, the specific normative setting of citizenship rights and the images the non-Muslim majority has developed about Islam. The prime factor should probably be seen in the underlying ‘life politics’, as in the case of young women who veil, which provides a model of possible activism in the public sphere and even partial creation of public space. ‘They consistently demand, though in different guises, the ‘return’ to a Muslim way of life, and at the same time condemn those interpretations of Islam that may confine them into the domestic space or turn them into subjects of male dominance’ (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003: 69). While such activism might fit an altered view of public life in the host societies, it will most likely continue to stir up the suspicion of public authorities and the media.

Muslim groups raise important legal and political questions about state and European institutions (Henkel, supra). They take seriously and interrogate the application of the principle of the separation of religion and politics. For instance, the French government’s recent efforts to institutionalise the representation of Islam in French society through the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman in order to create an Islam de France does not make a break with the historic, colonial and post-colonial co-optation of Muslim leaders. If it is the state’s prerogative to organise and legislate on the separation of religion and politics, it is not supposed to influence the selection of religious leadership. Some participants in the controversy, both Muslim and non-Muslim, contend that the French are violating the sacrosanct principle of the separation of religion and politics (Amiraux 2003). Ironically, the results of the elections were disappointing both in terms of the expectations of the French government and the aspirations of many Muslim activists, since most seats were gained by well-organised, conservative Muslim groups.

Autonomy of the religious field is what religious groups gain in the European ‘deals’ of separation. Without this, the deal is unfair and the nation-state betrays its own path of legitimisation. Such a contentious process helps to clarify how Muslims are now, much more than, for example, 25 years ago, an active part of plural societies and no longer simply heterogeneous cultural groups coming from outside. Increasingly, they
do not ask to be recognised as Muslims but as citizens or residents with normal rights, including the fruition of autonomous spaces for practising religion and fulfilling its imperatives of service and justice. But it is interesting and also sociologically 'normal' that this recognition can only be the result of organised collective action and that this collective action, especially if it responds to threats to the integrity of Muslim traditions, often raises the banners of Islam. Moreover, recognition is the beginning and not the end of the process, the core rationale of which is acquiring autonomous spaces for socio-religious life and participation in the affairs of the wider society. The emancipation of Catholics and Jews in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom did indeed follow a path of autonomisation, not least in the field of education.

It seems to be true that there are various ways for Muslims to organise themselves in Europe, to act individually and collectively. However, such an evaluation might be qualified after taking stock of specific European contexts. The variety and instability of legal arrangements and the existence of both co-opted and independent Muslim public opinionists aside, the control of the discourse on Islam by journalists, politicians and scholars shows the limits of the ability of Muslim actors to represent themselves in plural ways, and therefore to carve out a differentiated public space for themselves. This clearly highlights the limits of the inclusiveness of the public sphere and reduces the possibilities for non-conformist Muslims to become actors on an equal footing in society. The anxiety about the danger of Islamic symbols disrupting sacred secular borders is heightened because the 'Islamic other' evokes the ghosts of a European past in which the proliferation of untamed religious divisiveness unleashed the catastrophe of the Wars of Religion and threatened to precipitate all of Europe into chaos. Historians stress that what recreated a sense of commonality among the conflicting religio-political factions in Europe at the time of the Wars of Religion was the discourse on the 'Turkish threat', i.e. the fear of the encroaching Ottoman Empire (Höfert 2000). The fact that the single largest community of Muslims in Europe today consists of residents and citizens of Turkish background, and that Turkey is likely to be the biggest country to join the EU after the new accessions from Eastern Europe, show the extent to which Islam increasingly represents the internal religious other in Europe, which is caught in the dilemma of being recognised as a legitimate minority culture, while escaping the predicament of being a minority to watch and monitor, continuously needing to prove its loyalty.

The movement of Muslims into public space and their determined but often fragile strivings to make public space, like Muslim women reflectively wearing the headscarf in schools and public professions, signal the religiously determined character of their openness and their way of going public and challenges the idea of the mere coexistence between abstract, mutually aseptic others as members of a pre-established game to reach a consensus within a one-dimensional public sphere (Salvatore and Amir-Moazami 2002). While issues of cultural background, the predicaments of migration, and the transnational and diasporic dimensions of many Muslims’ lives appear to set them apart from other religious communities in Europe, the positioning of Muslim associational life vis-à-vis state regulation, and the related claims to rights and
participation in the field of politics place them on similar and comparable terms with other non-Muslim groups, as testified by several grass-roots initiatives of inter-faith dialogue. Among other religious groups in Europe, one finds comparable diasporic (Jews) and migration-related (various neo-Christian groups popular among transnational migrants of African origin) predicaments. As several studies have shown (see the report on a recent conference in van Nieuwkerk 2003), the role of Muslim converts of European origin, especially women, in Muslim associational life in Europe is steadily growing (see in particular Badran 2003), and conversions are also becoming important among other non-Muslim groups in Europe. Such a consideration of Muslims along with other religious groups and socio-religious movements in Europe can help to dissolve the residual myth, further propagated by many secularly minded European politicians in contemporary debates on the ‘culture of Europe’, that there is a Judaeo-Christian civilisation or even ‘tradition’ underlying the identity of Europe, a civilisation basically synonymous with the West and therefore neatly distinct from Muslim culture.

Against such ideologically biased views, it should be stressed that what most socio-religious groups and religiously inspired individual actors share are the values of justice, service to others, and sometimes the pride that goes with a feeling of justice and solidarity: all values that cannot be completely subsumed under the logic of exchange, ordered competition and fair discussion that characterise the normative understanding, though not necessarily the practice, of European public spheres. The importance of discourses of justice, human solidarity and peace is increasing for those religious groups that see their mandate as global (Casanova 2001). These discourses and underlying values also resonate with non-religious understandings of the democratic enrichment of the public sphere in the post-welfarist era of non-labour-based ‘new social movements’. While the feminist and gay pride movements have significantly redrawn the boundaries of the public sphere, socio-religious movements with their clearer value-orientation are able to shift those boundaries even further by making specific claims about human dignity. These codes do not ‘invade’ the arena of politics but often create a pragmatic link between the social and the political fields. The Enlightenment dream of creating a pure field of politics governed by a discourse of reason mediated in the public sphere has been eroded by the transversality of a religious code that finds ramifications, new allies and new foes in broad sectors of society. Increased efforts to promote inter-faith dialogue risk being short-lived if they insist on inculcating abstract values of tolerance, while they tend to be effective when they evidence the commonalities and differences among various traditions of justice and ‘doing good’ across different religious groups, and their multiple arrangements and engagements (or lack thereof) with public institutions.

Conclusion

In such a context, state authorities can no longer simply control religion from the top down. Even the preference, in some European states, for different forms of established religion is overrun by the spread of religious pluralism through migration, conversion
and new socio-religious movements. The paradigm of the privatisation of religion has in the long run more successfully eroded the state’s ability to monitor an elusive object (belief) than it has weakened religious authority. While the preservation or fostering of civility and overlapping exchange and communication as the kernel of secularity are not questioned by the majority of Muslim groups, historically-proven formulas for establishing a secular public sphere (and corresponding different state–church institutional deals) cannot be equated with the sphere itself, and therefore cannot be imposed on Muslim groups uncritically as the state-of-the-art in the realm of participation. In the demands of religious groups can be read the desire for a rebuilding of the public sphere on the basis of a notion of intercultural civility, which would not prevent contested reasoning and discourse in social and public arenas. The prevention of agonic exchange is tantamount to open (or often hidden) repression of all disestablished or weakly established groups, among whom Muslims are prominent. Even the Rushdie Affair that generated widespread ‘moral panics’ and mutual essentialisms had, as Werbner argued, the merit of freeing Muslims, and those of Pakistani origin in particular, ‘from the self-imposed burden of being a silent, well-behaved minority, whatever the provocation, and opened up the realm of activist, anti-racist and emancipatory citizenship politics’ (Werbner 1998: 18–19). Surveillance and the obsession with public order, security and prevention are inimical to the encounter that is at the root of the notion of the public sphere. But there is more. Without ongoing dynamics of agonic civility, the necessary reflexivity toward the self and the other and their concomitant values also fail.

The issue of the participation of religious groups in European post-national and post-secular public spheres should be addressed from a different perspective than that of public recognition. Such a perspective relies upon the conceptually and institutionally weak ideas of multiculturalism. While shallow formulas of multiculturalism are dying out, a juridification of religious issues, on the one hand, further reifies religion into a mere discourse of rights. On the other hand, however, there are different uses of institutional opportunities, where the existence of spaces of rights and liberties is genuinely sought by Muslims in Europe, starting from the acquisition of full or dual citizenship, to organising religious teaching in state schools, to instituting private religious schools. While these processes are important, the significance of claiming rights and of a politics of recognition is entrenched in the normative character of European public spheres that reflects a notion of secularity not able, by default, to contain the aspirations of Muslims (Asad 2003).

These practical bottlenecks are reflected at the theoretical level of conception of the public sphere. It should be considered, contrary to a widespread but inaccurate perception, that for Habermas—the often-evoked prophet of a modern public sphere of rights claims, deliberation and recognition—the crucial social spaces are the ‘life-worlds’ fostering a sense of justice, solidarity and civic responsibility. In spite of the normative rigidities that result from considering the public sphere on its own terms, Habermas’s life-worlds cut through the private and the public spheres and are the only existential and communicative relay between the two spheres. This view does not imply the implacable demand of a preventive privatisation of religion as a condition.
for a reflexive rationalisation of claims and access to the public sphere. Enduring reflexivity towards one’s own primordial loyalties can only be generated in the process of standing up, speaking out, testing the sentiments of specific audiences or of the general public and, if one fails, learning from one’s own mistakes. Fuller participation would entail the experimentation and implementation of new forms of public communication giving space to different traditions of engagement and discourse and also to different conceptions of the public sphere. As Asad has argued:

There is no good reason whatever why, as Muslim immigrants become full members of European states and the European Community, Europe’s past achievements … should not be reconstructed in richer and more complex ways, in order to accommodate Islamic history (Asad 1997: 194).

References


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