

The Jolt Evolution of European Islam

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Since the 1990's it has been apparent that the process of implantation of Islam in Europe was following a pattern of growth that, although consistent, was far from being linear (Cesari & McLoughlin, 2005; Maréchal, Allievi, Dassetto, & Nielsen, 2003). It continues to suffer from internal tensions, and the years 2004-2005 have illustrated these trends.

The tensions within European Islam

Anti-terrorist police operations have intensified since September 11th and the attacks in Madrid and London, repeating the pattern already established at Casablanca, Jakarta, Sharm el-Sheikh and elsewhere. These operations have brought to light the existence of European networks aiding terrorist activities. Other incidents have followed, such as the murder of Dutch cinema director Theo van Gogh (in November 2004) or the participation of a Belgian Muslim convert in a kamikaze attack in Iraq (in November 2005).

These events have shown that a link has been forged between worldwide Islam and European Islam, that is to say between Europeans Muslims (whether they be second-generation immigrants or converts) and the Muslim realities elsewhere. We can reflect on the numerous networks that have been discovered with links to Pakistan and Afghanistan and, more recently, Iraq. A militant tendency in favour of armed action has thus indeed been established in Europe. This tendency has generally been identified by the term *jihadist*, in view of the ideological justifications for such a stance made by Muslim authors like Abdallah Azzam or

Omar Bakri and by the militants of al-Qaida (Kepel & Milelli, 2005). This tendency existing within European Islam, while clearly only supported by a minority, has had a symbolic impact on all Muslims. It also forces them to position themselves with regard to these troublesome fellow-believers. It likewise leads us to question the nature of Islamic terrorism, its sources and its structure. (Dassetto & Maréchal, 2005-2006)

It is especially the majority tendency within the community, and particularly within the younger generation, which has suffered most from these developments. This European brand of Islam, which seeks to establish its role in society at large through its religious identity, wishes to foster a close association with European values and culture. It wants to be both Muslim and European at one and the same time. While the groups belonging to the association known as Muslim Presence, founded and led by Tareq Ramadan, have received considerable publicity, numerous other associations also exist. In general these movements – which can be considered as “reformist” in view of their desire to engender a process of religious adaptation – are especially popular among the younger generation originating from the Maghreb region.

They co-exist and sometimes compete with other groups or other visions of Islam. In some cases they are even represented by Muslim dignitaries. They have however a particularly difficult relationship with existing groups that are implanted in Europe, but inspired by influences coming from outside Europe. We can think of the Deobandis, whose Islamic schools influenced those responsible for the London terrorist attacks. Or the numerous Turkish organizations, from the Milli Görüs to the Nurgiu, which continue to influence the population of Turkish origin, and whose identification with a spirit of “Turkishness” to a great extent hinders links with all other European Muslims, of whatever origin. In addition, the Turkish government’s organism of religious orientation – the Turkish

Directorate for Religious Affairs (*Diyânet Islam ire isli-gi*) – exercises its influence in a similar direction. Lastly, we come to a grouping whose influence both over the population of Arab origin and over converts to Islam has recently been revealed: the various groups which are described and describe themselves as *Salafists* (*dawa salafyya*), and which could more correctly be defined as neo-Salafists in order to avoid confusion with the Salafist movement of the early 20th century. They also identify their groups using the term as *sunnah wa-l jamâa*. This neo-Salafism originated from a strategy devised in Saudi Arabia in the 1980's to direct doctrine and training so as the better to control the future development of Islam. *Tarbyya* (religious training) is in fact a key element in their methodology. Figures such as the Sheikhs Ibn Baz, Ibn Othaymine, or al Albani are the leading lights in the first generation of neo-Salafists who favour a brand of Islam which could be described as literalist and puritanical. Young Europeans have in fact attended training programmes at neo-Salafist universities in Muslim countries and are now starting to return to their homes to set up groups dedicated to training and spirituality. As can be seen, the emergence of a European brand of Islam with its own autonomy and specific identity is a slow and difficult process. Moreover the shortage of leaders, in terms of both numbers and quality, continues to have a negative effect on the evolution of European Islam (IEMed, 2005). Meanwhile European countries and European Muslims alike continue to hesitate about the strategies to adopt in order to form tomorrow's Muslim elite. No progress has so far been made with the plan to open an Islamic faculty to form part of the University of Strasbourg, alongside the Protestant and Catholic ones. In Germany religious training is practically left under the control of *Diyânet*. The only country to have taken any initiatives at all is the Netherlands, deeply traumatized by the murder of van Gogh. Amsterdam's *Vrije Universiteit* has established a master's degree course in Islamic Studies, and the University of Leiden is preparing to follow suit, helped by generous financing from the Government. Similar Government aid has also doubled the size of the Islamic Studies faculty in Rotterdam, founded in 1997 and set up at the initiative of the Muslim community.

Islam and integration

The difficulties facing Islam are real, and the radical or conservative groups have their influence. What

also became clear however during the 2005 riots in the French suburbs is that, contrary to what was first claimed, these riots had nothing to do with Islam. They were provoked by young people on the margins of society, isolated in a ghetto culture, and trapped in a traditional logic of male honour transplanted into a contemporary context and which results in them becoming completely alienated from the society in which they live.

On the other hand, Islam quite often seems to provide solutions that lead to self-improvement. "Islamicized" youngsters – except for those caught up in sectarian rigidity – generally succeed at school, adhere to moral principles and acquire a code of conduct which prepares them for a European lifestyle in which they can live to the full their roles as young people, citizens, pupils and employees. These observations show the nature of the French paradox. There is of course a secular, integrated youth that follows along the path that leads to complete integration. The paradox is elsewhere. When we find on the one hand a non-Islamicized, marginalized youth of Muslim origin and on the other hand an Islamicized youth, which sometimes finds itself in conflict with the secular vision of the French republic and the difficulty it has in adapting to this new religious presence in society, as the question of the headscarf and the decision adopted in relation to it have demonstrated. The decision to prohibit the wearing of headscarves in educational establishments has led to some female students going to Belgium to continue their studies.

Having said that, it is also true that the wearing of the headscarf, which has become an almost obsessive symbol for many Muslims (with the additional voice of the neo-Salafists), is starting to become a subject of internal debate within the Muslim community itself and among Muslim young women. On occasions the latter have started to protest against the handicap that wearing a headscarf can represent for them, for instance when looking for work, and some "Islamic feminists" have begun to criticize, orally but not in writing, such obligations, devised by what they describe as doctrinaire males.

The Cartoons

The "cartoon affair" came into the headlines in late 2005. This incident reveals the slowness of the process of evolution of Islam in Europe.

Leaving aside the arguments presented in the different discussions for or against the cartoon images of the prophet Mohammed, this episode and the ensuing controversy can be interpreted from two basic angles.

The more pessimistic of the two would be to cite this controversy as yet another episode confirming the increasing disparities and tensions between the Islamic world and the West. According to this theory, we are involved in each camp in a phase of constructing the image of the enemy, with everything that involves: generalizations, stereotypes, total mobilization. In other words: we are creating a conflict for which we have even invented a concept, the conflict of civilizations.

The more optimistic of the two theories is that we should regard the affair of the cartoons as a moment of tension that is inevitable and inherent to all societies, especially when it is a question of relatively new phenomena which societies have not yet fully adjusted to or for which they have not yet devised methods of control. An even more positive approach could be added to this second view, if we say that the conflict is at the end of the day positive, since it obliges the two sides to clarify their viewpoint.

The numerous public comments on the affair in recent weeks have made at least two things clear.

First, dialogue has taken place only to a fairly limited extent. There has been little real debate. Second, it is difficult for such a situation to develop into a constructive conflict. On the contrary, left to itself, the debate can easily descend into mutual incomprehension, or be taken over by social groupings that could turn it in the direction of the first model referred to above.

This controversy demonstrates the importance of various factors.

Globalization: the controversy is a perfect example of the new relationship between local and global realities. An obscure local Danish incident is projected onto the world stage and goes far beyond the country's frontiers. The newspaper concerned, *Jyllands-Posten*, thought it could ignore the fact that, whether it be through the presence of Muslims in Denmark or through the normal process of communications, it was in close proximity to the heart of the Muslim world. At the same time Muslims are learning what it is to come face to face with persons or groups who do not think like them, both in a European and in a world context. They are experiencing pluralism.

Self-image: in this affair, each side either rigidly defends

its own position, or is led to modify its position when confronted with the image reflected back by the other camp. The European press is thus led to question the correct use of the basic principle of freedom of expression. More generally, society is led to question the sociological importance of respectful and disrespectful attitudes, and the selectiveness with which these attitudes are applied, depending on the context, the status and the social rank of those involved. The Muslims, for their part, are led to reflect on their attitude to the portrayal of the image of the Prophet, and beyond that, perhaps also to the figure of the Prophet himself. They will likewise reflect on the image that Muslim practices give not only of Muslim societies but also of Islam itself. For, together with an analysis of attitudes that centres on the question of lack of respect, there is also the basic question of the evolution of contemporary Islam, a subject which Muslims will no longer be able to avoid before they start worrying about how to defend themselves in the face of others. *Leaders:* many community leaders have been disorientated by this affair, a fact which leads us to ask at least two basic questions. On the Muslim side the modern intellectual leadership is relatively fragile, especially compared with the technological capacity of the means of communication. The image of the majority of Muslim intellectuals, preachers, or journalists – or at least of those who express themselves in public – does not give the impression of being on a par with the presence of Islam in a globalized world. The gradual emergence of a European leadership is however confronted with the influence and the speeches of players on a globalized stage. We can also feel, moreover, the lack of the presence of intellectuals, whether Muslim or not, who could play the role of bridge or middlemen, because they have a good knowledge of contemporary realities and can easily interact, dialogue, debate, and mutually enrich each others' interpretations of events.

Politics of the imagination: the evolution in recent years of the relationship between the West and the Islamic world has shown how the power of the imagination, particularly in religious and cultural terms, can be used politically to mobilize and even galvanize sectors of the population. While the written and spoken word were the great instruments used in both the 19th and in the first half of the 20th centuries, this role has now passed to the video image and multimedia communication. We are of course no better at using today's tools in a critical way than we were at using the tools of previous centuries.

Relationships with others: we can soon see the limitations of the intercultural discourse: communication alone is not sufficient, if each side sticks to its own positions. It is not possible to build a society exclusively on the basis of communication between cultures, however indispensable this may well be. We can see that for such important subjects it is necessary to hold a debate, to seek a common path, founded on trust and on a genuine exercise of "mutual inclusion" by which each individual is able to define his identity by constructing it at the same time as he constructs his relationship with others.

When we observe this kind of mutual relationship we can see how arguments developed by one side or another do not easily withstand the other group's critical questioning. We see the others' powers of imagination mobilized, and sometimes their fabrications. We can see how past images from the collective memory are revived. We also see the strength of the others' emotions and how they express them, which reflect an image of ourselves seen through the astonished eyes of the others. (Dassetto, 2004; Onghena, 2004).

Hostilities

It is not easy to predict the future evolution of non-Muslims' attitudes to Islam inside Europe. Muslims claim that there is an increase in Islamophobia, which is moreover also shown in opinion polls. Nevertheless we often confuse the obvious anxiety felt by sectors of the population about the future evolution of Islam with the concept of "Islamophobia". It is however clear that different leaders or political parties use these anxieties as an electoral tool. The *Lega Nord* in Italy, the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium and other parties in Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are important examples. In the face of this we have seen the other parties act with tremendous caution, since they well know that they risk setting off fires that could be difficult to extinguish.

It should also be noted that in Muslim groups or among individual Muslims there has been a growth in anti-semitism, a sort of anti-Jewishness which attacks

synagogues and is confused with hostility to the state of Israel. In the same way opposition to the Western presence in Iraq or to American policy leads to actions or arguments which are fundamentally anti-Western. We can see just how many local realities cross paths with developments on a global level, often producing websites as their vehicle of expression and principal show-place.

In other words, we can conclude that the tensions surrounding ethnic and religious questions are not about to disappear. This leads us to suppose that there will be a need for far-reaching action in Europe's new multi-religious, multi-ethnic societies. Relationships are now taking shape in Europe which are only one expression among others of the new globalized, internationalized world which is being formed. It could well be that we have not yet understood the challenges that will have to be met and the dynamism that will be necessary to ensure that this new world is not trapped by a descent into catastrophic future conflicts.

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