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Secularism and Islam: The Theological Predicament

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Secularism and Islam: The Theological Predicament

Olivier Roy

Does the integration of Islam in Europe presuppose a prior 'religious reformation' that would make Islam compatible with so-called 'European values'? The wave of religious revival that has touched the new generations of Muslims in Europe is not a return to traditional religious practices but, on the contrary, a recasting of religious norms and values in a European context. Fundamentalism means deculturation. What we are witnessing is a complex, and often tense, process of formatting Islam into a Western model of relationship between state, religion and society. But this process is taking place precisely at a time when Europe is not sure about its own identity: what does a 'European Christian identity' mean when churches are increasingly empty? Faith and culture have never been so disconnected.

Keywords: Islam, Europe, reformation, religion identity

Does the integration of Islam in Europe presuppose a prior 'religious reformation' that would make Islam compatible with so-called 'European values'? And what are these European values? Are they Christian values or secular values? While all European constitutions and treaties stress the commitment towards 'human rights', 'religious freedom' and 'democracy', the status of 'secularism' is more complex. If we define secularism as the separation of state and religion, this is not the case in many European countries which grant a specific status to one or more recognised religions (for example, England, Italy and Germany). If secularism is taken to mean that the religious reference is more and more irrelevant in society, daily life and culture, accompanied by a decrease in individual religious practices, which is the case in all European countries, then Europe is certainly secular. But in this case, secular values conflict with Christian ones: issues like abortion,

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contraception and gay marriages are largely opposing 'believers' on one hand, and 'non-believers' on the other. How can we refer to the Christian roots of secular Europe if Europe's values contradict the teachings of the Church?

Going beyond the debate on Christian identity, however, there is a large consensus that the huge Muslim population that has recently settled in Europe creates a specific challenge, because Islam may not be compatible with either the Christian identity of Europe or its secularism. The debate is framed indifferently in cultural terms (Western culture versus Oriental culture) or religious terms (Christian Europe versus Islam) as Islam is seen as an all-encompassing religion in which there is no distinction between politics, religion and culture. But such an approach, by essentializing Islam as a closed and atemporal system of thought, ignores the concrete practices of real Muslims and their interaction with a European society which is itself complex and often divided on many central issues.

This article intends to address the premises that more or less openly underlie the public policies of European governments and local authorities when dealing with the issue of 'integrating' Islam, either by making room for (authorising the building of mosques), or conversely, restraining Muslim religious practices (occasionally banning burqas and veils). Both attitudes, although in opposition, contribute to 'formatting' the religious practices of Muslims, which means adapting them to an environment in which culture does not play a mediating role between the individual believer and society. Traditional cultures are fading away among the new generations of immigrants who, by the way, are no longer migrants; nevertheless, they are in many instances experiencing a religious revival which entails a recasting of religious markers and norms disconnected from the pristine cultures. So the issue is clearly about 'religion' and less and less about culture. This is why multiculturalism is increasingly irrelevant, and why the issue is ever more associated with a debate on what makes up the theological core of Islam as a religion. This is what is referred to here as the 'theological predicament'.

The vain essentialisation of Islam

An ongoing debate about Islam in Europe deals with the 'compatibility' of Islam with so-called European values: is Islam compatible with (take your pick)... democracy, secularism, human rights (more exactly women's rights, gay rights, etc.). This is the theological predicament: the issue of integrating Muslims in Europe is supposed to be linked to an enquiry into the theological tenets of Islam as a religion. Either the Muslims present and promote a liberal interpretation of Islam, or their integration in Europe is conditioned on a prior theological reform that would make Islam compatible with (once more) so-called Western values. Such a view is also promoted by 'liberal' Muslims, like Irshad Manji, a Canadian journalist and essayist, while former Muslims turned atheist like Ayaan Hirsi Ali or

Ibn Warraq are more pessimistic: they have doubts about the possibility of reforming Islam. The media regularly highlight the plight of some 'moderate' Muslim thinker who has to be promoted and encouraged in opposition to his fellow believers: in France, for instance, local imams like Soheib Ben Cheykh[1] in Marseille or Hassen Chalghoumi[2] in Seine-Saint-Denis are featured as lonely reformists coming under attack from fundamentalist groups. Irshad Manji has even been compared to Martin Luther.[3] Some Muslim thinkers or leaders declare themselves to be the long awaited Muslim reformer that the West desperately needs: in a speech given in Great Britain, Tahir ul Qadri, leader of a Pakistani religious movement, presented himself as the first Muslim leader to have written the definitive fatwa against terrorism.[4]

This essentialist perception lies in the background of not only many stories reported by journalists (from polygamy and honour killings to terrorism) but also policies implemented by governments and administrations. Endless debates on ''what does the Qur'an say?'', not to speak about ''what does the Qur'an *really* say?'' fill blogs and conferences.[5] The debate about the burqa hinges on the same question: is the burqa nothing more than the fullest expression of a basic tenet of Islam (the seclusion of women) or is the burqa alien to the true spirit of Islam. In the end, all this means is that the burqa can be banned either because it is seen as an excessive but true expression of Islam, or because it is not an expression of Islam at all. But in both cases, the debate is about Islam, not about the personal and private decision of a given woman to wear the burqa.

However, this essentialist approach presents many legal and methodological hurdles that will be presented here. First of all, it challenges the separation of church and state and, paradoxically, the supposedly secular nature of the European state, because the state seems to consider interfering with religious creeds a duty. Second, it supposes that Europe's political culture is based on a set of premises shared among Europeans, including Christian believers. Third, it sees Islam as a timeless set of norms and values that are inscribed in the mind of every Muslim, even non-believers, who in this case are 'acted on' by an Islamic

[1] Author of *Marianne et le Prophète*, in which he defines a ''republican Islam'' compatible with the French *laïcité*.

[2] ''Hassen Chalghoumi, un imam pas comme les autres'', *Le Point.fr*, 26 January 2010. ''An Imam unlike the others'' because he is a moderate as the article points out. http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-societe/2010-01-26/hassen-chalghoumi-un-imam-pas-comme-les-autres/920/0/417413.

[3] She wrote *The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, and when awarded a PhD *honoris causa* by the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, she was greeted with these words by Sunil Kukreja, Professor and Chair, Comparative Sociology, ''Now the Director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University, your courage has drawn comparisons to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, to Martin Luther and Salman Rushdie, to Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan.''

[4] D. Casciani, ''Islamic Scholar Tahir ul-Qadri Issues Terrorism Fatwa'', *BBC News*, 2 March 2010. For a critical response to this fatwa, see T. Heneghan, ''Tahir ul-Qadri and the Difficulty of Reporting on Fatwas'', *Reuter FaithWorld*, 2 March 2010.

[5] Just Google the expression and look at the results.

'culture', culture here being little more than 'cold' religion. Therefore, the issue is to ensure the compatibility of these norms with so-called Western values or their national sub-sets. Yet, this approach ignores the daily practices of the various believers who do not care about writing a new treatise of Islamic theology, but simply adapt their own practices to a different environment, recast norms in terms of values, and try to find a common paradigm of 'faith' and religiosity with believers of other faiths, while leaving the theological framework of Islam almost intact. Incidentally, one should be careful about advocating reformation in religion. Many people who dream about seeing the coming of a Muslim Martin Luther have never read Martin Luther (and would be appalled by the '(in)compatibility' of his views with our Western values).

Reforming Islam through the state

Most public policies are driven by this 'theological predicament'. To give just one example, it is the underlying rational for stressing the need to train 'good' imams. Even countries where the separation of church and state is enshrined in the constitution are desperately trying to organise the training of imams: the French government subsidizes a course at the Catholic Institute of Paris, after having tried to set up an efficient representative body that could undertake the training (the body, *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*, exists but is not effective). In the German Land of North Rhine-Westphalia, the local authorities have themselves established the curriculum of religious courses for Islam in public schools. The British government subsidizes the Quilliam Foundation (which aims at ''developing a Muslim identity at home in, and with the West'' and, more boldly, ''reprogramming British Muslims'').[6] Another alternative is to grant recognition to branches of Islam that appear more 'moderate' than mainstream Sunnism: for instance, Alevism among the Turks in Germany. Sufism is regularly presented as more open than most orthodox schools. The issue is particularly important at the local level where mayors are confronted with requests from Islamic associations to allow the building of mosques; before granting the authorisation they usually endeavour to vet the association or its leaders to see if they are moderate.

But this interventionism runs against the very concept of religious freedom. Whatever the legal system in Europe, it is usually admitted that a modern democratic secular state should ensure freedom of religion and not interfere with religious practices as long as they do not infringe on others' freedom or break the law.

Of course, this quest for moderate Muslims has regularly been justified after 9/11 by the fear of letting extremists take control of local mosques and have them recruit activists. But this legitimate fear of terrorism is also caught up in the

[6] See the report, *Re-Programming British Muslims*.

'theological predicament': the premise is that the more radical a believer is in his religious attitudes, the more radical he may become in his political activities. The issue is twofold: how can we define religious 'extremism'? And what is the relation between religious extremism and political radicalism?

The only legal argument for the state to curb certain religious practices would be the existence of a connection between 'religious practice' and violence: the more you pray, the more prone you are to perpetrating terrorist acts. In France, Muslim employees vetted for security clearance at Paris Charles De Gaulle airport are routinely asked about the frequency of their mosque attendance. This feeling is so internalised that a regular argument to deny that a neighbour or relative has terrorist links is to stress his/her lack of religious observance.[7]

The only reason for which a secular state can contemplate prohibiting the public display of a specific religious practice is for public order, without making any statement about what a religion is or should be. To define what is normal and what is extreme in terms of religious practices is beyond the scope of the modern democratic state. Nevertheless, it is deeply entrenched in the minds and practices of many politicians and is also advocated by public opinion: even in liberal Great Britain, the majority of the population would support a ban on wearing the burqa in public.

But to what extent does radical religious thinking lead to violence or terrorism? Are burqa wearing women more prone to go for jihad? No data support the idea for instance that wearing a burqa is a first step to political violence: there are, interestingly enough, more and more women (most of them converts) joining Al Qaeda (Muriel Degauque, Malika Arroud), but none of them have been known to wear the burqa. By the same token, the Salafi 'uniform' (long white *shalwar* and *qamis*, white skull cap, etc.) is not in use among Al Qaeda activists. In fact, most studies show that strict religious practice is not a hallmark of Al Qaeda activists.[8] This focus on the theological content of Islam and on religious observance is, in fact, a legacy of the European political culture and not of Islamic politics, culture or faith.

State and religion in Europe: a long history of violence and tensions

The debate on Islam does not come out of the blue: it is closely linked to the centuries-old debate on the role of religion in society and politics. If, confronted with Islam, the French stress the prevalence of secularism and the Italians the

[7] Abderazak Besseghir, a baggage handler at Roissy airport, was falsely accused in December 2002 of hiding weapons and explosives in his car, and the family objected that he does not practice his religion. For testimonies of other baggage handlers interrogated by the police on their religious practices, see ''Nouvelles révélations dans l''affaire des bagagistes de Roissy'', *SaphirNews*, 26 Oct 2006, http://www.saphirnews.com/Nouvelles-revelations-dans-l-affaire-des-bagagistes-de-Roissy_a4973.html.

[8] Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks*.

leading role of Christianity, it is not because they have a different view of Islam, it is because they have a different view of religion. The search for a 'good Islam' does not embody a struggle between a liberal and secular Europe versus a foreign and fundamentalist religion (Islam). It re-enacts an age-old struggle inside Europe on the role of religion. What is at stake here is not so much Islam's compatibility with secularism as the definition, or more exactly the construction of secularism as a legal, cultural and political concept in the West.

If we look at history, neither secularism nor the separation of church and state is the product of European values based on the philosophy of the Enlightenment; rather, each is a political compromise, that may often have progressively turned into a consensus, to end religious wars. Such compromises have been established along national paradigms, which differ considerably from one European country to another. In fact, each European country has been able to achieve a stable compromise about the relationship between religion and politics after an initial period of violence and religious wars that lasted for centuries. Reformation in the early 16th century meant the breakdown of the religious unity of Europe. It entailed decades of religious wars, whose long-term effects can be observed well into the 20th century. The struggle was not between religion and tolerance, it was a struggle to make the state, religion and society coincide (*cuius regio, eius religio*). In essence, it is not secularism and tolerance that have shaped European political cultures, but wars of religion.

The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia established the modern nation state, which at first imposed the hegemonic role of a given religion. Secularism here just meant that the role of religion was defined by the political body, not that religion was pushed outside the public space. Until recently, freedom of religion in Europe meant freedom for religious minorities, more than an individual human right. These 'religious minorities' were dealt with under different paradigms: that of 'toleration', providing a lower status (Protestants in France in 1787, Catholics in Great Britain in 1827, Protestants in Spain in 1967 and, after the ban on minarets, Muslims in Switzerland) or of ''protected minority under international treaties'' (Alsatian Protestants in France after 1648, Crimean Tatars in Russia after 1787, Muslims in Greece under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923). In some countries where no religion was dominant, equal legal recognition was bestowed upon a limited number of religious communities (Protestantism and Catholicism, in Germany and the Netherlands, for instance), but that does not mean equal treatment for any religion (Judaism is legally recognised as a religion in Germany, but not – yet – Islam). Therefore the difference between 'great' religions and 'religious minorities' is still at work even where no official religion is established.

Even the French *laïcité* does not consider all religions as equal although they are all supposed to belong to the private sphere: there is still a hierarchy of religions. The French Catholic Church has many privileges (churches built before 1905 are

maintained by the local municipalities, official protocol puts the Catholic clergy in a higher position than other clergy in official ceremonies). Only four religions have the right to provide chaplains (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism and Islam[9]). And finally, the French Parliament has established a commission to curb 'cults', which means that the law was able to draw a line between 'religions' and 'cults' and thus define what a religion is. Religion is as much as ever a political issue.

Thus, far from being a history of slow and peaceful secularisation, relations between states and religions have always been conflictual in Europe and are a central part of European political cultures. This explains the fact that Europe has not just one, but several political cultures: there is little parallel between the definition of secularism in Germany, France and Italy, or between the role of the Catholic Church in Spain, Great Britain, Germany or the Netherlands.

The myth of Western values

The process of disentangling religion and culture among second generation Muslims in Europe is not acknowledged by the authorities, public opinion and media, but it is going on. In fact, proof of this 'autonomisation' of the religious factor is that the debate in most European countries is about religious symbols, not ethnic markers: veil, burqa, minarets, mosques and halal food. Nevertheless these religious markers are still often seen as 'cultural' markers, hence the permanent confusion. But this confusion is also the result of the ambivalent coalition that opposes the visibility of Islam in Europe. For much of the left, Europe is first of all secular. Modern values (democracy, individual freedom, freedom of religion, and more recently gender equality and sexual freedom) have been established against religion and more specifically of course against Christianity. The rise of Islam puts into question the curb that secularism has imposed on religion in general. Hence containing Islam in Europe is not a fight in defence of Christianity, but in defence of recently acquired freedoms: first, the separation of religion and politics; second, the new values of the sixties (which all revolve around sexuality and family), which have never been accepted by the Catholic Church or the evangelical Protestants.

On the other hand, many rightists oppose Islam because they consider that Europe is first of all a Christian land. Nevertheless, for most of them, Christianity has little to do with religious practices, it has to do with identity, not faith. Interestingly enough, many secularists are increasingly aligning themselves with the agenda of the Christian right by defining Europe as culturally Christian. But the Christianity they defend is not a faith, it is an identity. Religious practice is decreasing in Europe and this may be why staunch secularists

[9] Although Buddhists and Orthodoxes have recently been contacted to provide chaplains for prisons.

can now defend a 'Christian identity', precisely because faith is no longer a challenge to a secularist world view.

When he was president, Nicolas Sarkozy, who praises the Catholic Church but never goes to church, opposed Turkey's accession to the European Union on these premises. This view is also endorsed by the Italian Northern League, which assaulted the Patriarch of Milan for his supposed support for migrants, while calling for the cross to be put on the Italian national flag.

Hence an apparently shared reluctance towards the rise of the visibility of Islam among at least three very different segments of European public opinion (secularists, the Christian right and the 'born again' of different faiths) conceals very different, even conflicting agendas. Islam is the negative identity of a Europe that is unable to forge a common – much less positive – identity for itself.

Interestingly enough, the 'pro-Islam' elements among European political activists share the same lack of understanding of the shift from cultural Islam to Islam as a universal religion: they tend to be found in a very secular ultra-left (like the former mayor of London, Ken Livingstone), which supports Muslims not as believers but as the 'imported' part of the Third World, embodying the intersection between the working class (or 'underclass' when they are out of the job market) and the Third World. These activists, by definition, ignore the purely religious dimension of Islam, and tend to stress its cultural and political dimension (for instance by supporting multiculturalism). They too miss the growing disconnect between religion and culture and, not so incidentally, the rise of a 'believing' Muslim middle class which tends to be conservative in terms of moral values and to align with conservative Christians.

In fact there is no consensus in Europe about common values: abortion, same-sex marriage, assisted procreation have become the real dividing lines between the active faith communities and the rest of society. Traditional believers, born-agains and converts are at the core of the faith communities and tend to identify with the surrounding culture less and less: for them Europe is no longer Christian. By contrast, secularists turned islamophobe do not find the way back to empty churches: for them Christianity has to do with identity, not faith. And conversely, many Christian and Jewish believers realise that Islam-bashing could turn into religion-bashing: in France for instance, the three main religious representative bodies (Catholic, Jewish and Protestant) did not support the ban of the veil for school children.

We can conclude here that the apparent polarisation between a European public opinion stressing Western values and a Muslim faith community is the result of an optical illusion. It hides the changing patterns of relationship between religion and culture and the in-depth reshuffle of the different paradigms that have stabilised the tensions between religion and politics in Europe. But it also hides the changing patterns of religiosity among Muslims in Europe. There is no longer any cultural

evidence of Islam, and the religion transmitted by their parents to the Muslims that live in Europe today appears to them enmeshed in a culture they no longer share. They have to reconstruct what it means to be a Muslim.

The formatting of Islam in the West

In traditional Muslim societies, religious prescriptions are embedded in culture and often in law. In a situation in which Muslims are a minority, these prescriptions are disentangled from the web of socially acceptable and culturally normative attitudes: they have to be recast as purely religious norms. But they are also sorted differently and categorized according to the legal system of the host country: this will be referred to as the formatting effect of the state. The right to wear the veil, for instance, could be treated according to different co-existing normative domains: gender equality, personal freedom, neutrality of the civil service, labour laws, security requirements, etc. Religious norms are recast either as values or as new norms defined by new paradigms (individual freedom, freedom of religion). This formatting effect is not only accepted, but also promoted by Muslims (liberals as well as conservatives).

Muslims in Europe, like any religious minority, have no problem with the separation of church and state, because the state is not, and has no chance of becoming 'Islamic'. Throughout the history of the Muslim world, power has mostly been a very secular practice, even if the ruler had to give lip service to religion. For instance, theocracy was almost unknown until the Islamic revolution of Iran. The *ulama*, a professional guild of religious experts, were never in charge of political affairs: they did provide politicians, judges and civil servants with legitimacy of power, but were not themselves in charge of state power. In fact, the very rise of 'Islamist movements' in the mid-20th century (like the Muslim Brothers), who claimed that no existing Muslim country could be called an 'Islamic state', shows how the divide between religion and politics was acknowledged by the supporters of an Islamic state. Only a revolution could impose (and not restore) an Islamic state that had never existed, except (but even this is controversial) during the early period of the Islamic community. Islamic law, *sharia,* is not a closed legal code but is open to interpretation and adaptation by professional judges.

When sharia is transformed into the law of the state, it loses its authenticity because no state can give free rein to professional judges not just to implement the law but to 'make' the law outside the control of the state. State implementation of the sharia is either the end of the state (the Pakistani or Afghan Taliban) or the end of the sharia (Iran, where the learned clergy has been slowly but continuously disengaging itself from a dictatorship increasingly controlled by a lay apparatus based on the Revolutionary Guards).

But at least as far as Muslims in Europe are concerned, the main issue is not, once again, about ''what does Islam really say?'' but what their real religious practices are. The point missed by the Western debate is how Muslims, including activists, are transformed by their interaction with Western secular society, without neglecting the fact that this society is also transformed by a process of integration that forces it to rethink its traditional paradigms of national identity, challenged not only by immigration, but more deeply by the crisis of the modern nation state. It is interesting to note that the construction of the European Union is almost parallel with the timing of immigration. Immigration and European integration started around the same time (the fifties and sixties), in France the first debate on the veil (1989) came just before the debate on the Maastricht Treaty (1992), and the second crisis (leading to the law banning the veil in schools in 2004) happened just before the rejection of the Nice Treaty in France (2005). Thus, the nation state is challenged at the same time from above (Brussels) and from below (immigration), leading to a nationalist and populist backlash, often opposed both to Europe and to Islam.

In the mind of the European public opinion, sharia is the deterrent *par excellence*: Muslims are called upon to repudiate it, as President Sarkozy asked them to do in a famous television debate with Tariq Ramadan.[10] Ramadan's answer, which has been referred to as an example of his 'double speak', was that, while the sacred text cannot be changed, a moratorium on some of its implications should be announced. This position is in fact perfectly coherent with the two-world theory: there is the sacred space of religion and there is the society in which the believer is living and to which s/he should adapt. The secular state has nothing to say about the hereafter, and takes into consideration only worldly practices. Hence, for Muslims, the issue is not so much rejecting sharia as recasting it.

There are many ways to deal with sharia. The liberal one is to explain it in terms of values not norms, the way Reform Jews did in the 19th century. Petty and unacceptable norms are rejected because they were more or less adapted to a given society which no longer exists; the believer has to go back to the intention beyond the written norms and find a way to maintain the spirit of the law in a new context (for instance stressing decency instead of wearing a veil).

Moreover, a secular state will of course not implement punishments that could be advocated by some sharia norms. By acknowledging the impossibility of coercion, liberals as well as fundamentalists have to redefine sanctions in this profane world either as purely spiritual, or as based on contractual acceptance of arbitration courts which, by definition, are bound by the laws of the state. The demand to establish sharia courts in Canada and Great Britain has to be understood in this

[10] French channel Antenne 2, 20 November 2003.

context, where there is no question of introducing stoning or amputation. Even what is seen as the peak of the 'Islamisation' of Europe, the establishment of an arbitration sharia court, is also a way to format sharia in line with an existing judicial paradigm, an arbitration court that contracting parties agree to take as a referee. By the way, this explains why the call to grant legal recognition to sharia courts takes place only in common law countries, and not in continental Europe, where it cannot fit with the existing legal institutions.

Even 'non-liberal' views of sharia can lead to the disentanglement of religious norms and social behaviours, for example, by putting a religious marker on a secular social practice (halal fast food). The use of the headscarf is increasing among educated, second generation Muslim women, but their social practices are integrative, through education and access to the labour market: there are now headscarf-wearing executive women, and headscarf-wearing single mothers.

Sharia is for instance recast by Salafis as a personal handbook of precise norms, disconnected from their social context (because they consider this context as pagan even in traditional Muslim societies): how to dress, eat, wash, speak, etc. They use handbooks listing the norms that should direct the life of an individual Muslim in any circumstances, like *The Way of the Muslim* by Sheikh Aldjazairi.[11] But in the same book there is a chapter on ''how to behave with slaves'', which might seem rather irrelevant for converts and born-agains in destitute neighbourhoods of Paris suburbs. It is all the more disconcerting that Sheikh Aldjazairi does not advocate the establishment of an Islamic state, where slavery would be authorized, but writes as if slavery is a permanent pattern of society. Instead of double speak, such an attitude shows how disconnected the Salafi discourse is from real social and political issues. It corresponds more to a cult attitude, the withdrawal of unhappy believers into a closed and marginal faith community.

By trying to recast sharia as a normative system that does not rely on the state for implementation, most Muslims tend to transform it into an *à la carte* menu, depending on individual decisions or the advice of a more or less independent 'sheikh'. The same individual can freely shift from one interpretation to another, from one group to another, according to his or her individual trajectory. Whatever the choice between stressing values instead of norms or norms instead of spirit, the endeavour to develop sharia outside the scope of the state is a way to acknowledge secularisation: it also fits with the concept of the separation of church and state. A fundamentalist faith community can thrive in a secular and permissive society.

[11] A. Aldjazairi, *Minhaj ul Muslim* (*ebook*) http://ebookbrowse.com/minhaj-al-muslim-shiekh-abu-bakr-jaabir-al-jazairy-pdf-d186925065) translated into many European languages; the French version, *La voie du musulman* (there are different translations and publishers, and the spelling of the author's name might vary) is very popular and can be found in any Islamic bookshop in France.

The ambivalence of the secular state: providing freedom, controlling freedom

While the secular state, whatever its temptations, cannot reform a religion, it can play an important role in formatting it. The alternate stress on support (in the name of religious freedom) and restriction (in the name of public order), even if it is not based on a long-term coherent vision, has the effect of defining the conditions of practices, both negatively (restrictions on veil, processions, bell-ringing, call to prayers) and positively (giving official recognition to places of worship, appointing chaplains, granting tax exemption). This formatting is not restricted to government edicts and laws, it is also a consequence of court decisions, as well as of polemics and pressure from public opinion, often amplified by the media.

The process of formatting begins by granting a faith community the qualification of religion (hence admitting that the until that time dominant religions do not have a monopoly on truth and the sacred). It pushes a faith community to organise itself along the dominant paradigm. For example, imams are now expected to represents the community – which they do not do in traditional Islam – as priests or rabbis do. It re-organises the connections between norms and their theological background by making a distinction between 'high religion' (the essential tenets) and 'low religion' (cultural or surrogatory ones): for instance, by defining the burqa either as an expression of faith or, on the contrary, as having little to do with faith. It thus contributes to redefining Islam as a 'mere' religion. Marriage is a typical example of formatting: when a Muslim couple living in the West marries in a mosque, bride and groom hand in hand, the bride dressed in white and carrying a bouquet as in a Christian church wedding, is this merely a superficial adaptation, a change in the conception of the couple or is it a redefinition of the religious value of Muslim marriage?[12]

In fact, formatting is very often a process of interaction, reciprocal adjustments and reformulation of norms from very different cultural fields into a new set of norms aimed, if not at creating a consensus, at least at making the different norms and beliefs compatible and acceptable. Consensus is an ideal that often harks back to a mythical past, purportedly the casualty of some historical event that is deliberately evoked. Take, for example, the insistence in France on 'republican consensus' or 'republican norms', which are allegedly under threat from the arrival of Islam, whereas neither corresponds to historical fact: France has effectively been a republic since 1789, but against a permanent political backdrop of undeclared civil war, in which revolutionaries and reactionaries, the secular elites and clerics, communists and anti-communists continually brand their adversaries 'enemies of the nation'. This fantasy consensus is not the legacy of the good old days (that never were): it is the prospect on which the formatting of Islam is focused.

[12] Boubekeur, *Le voile de la mariée*.

One religion among others

The consequence of this formatting, both through the personal practices of the believers and through state pressure and action, is to put Islam within the same paradigm as the other religions. What is the new shared 'format' that Islam is now increasingly sharing with the other religions in the West? There are three dimensions to it:

A convergence of religiosities, in other words, defining faith and the believer's relationship to his/her religion, often expressed in terms of a spiritual quest. The market offers a range of products to fulfil one and the same demand. This demand thus tends to be standardised by the market, reflecting the consumers' image of what it is supposed to be. Nowadays, religion is no longer defined by anthropologists or philosophers, and less and less by the ''professionals'' – clerics or preachers – chasing after the convert/customer. Individual conversions often illustrate this itinerant, nomadic, even eclectic characteristic of the new believer.

A convergence of definitions: the notion of 'religion' becomes a normative paradigm with no specific content. It is the designation of any system as a religion, without taking account of the content that makes it a religion: these days, it is the courts that decide in the event of a dispute, even though they claim not to deal with matters of theology. Even, and perhaps especially, in countries where there is a strict division between religion and power (France, the United States) which prohibits the state from defining what a religion is, it is still necessary to specify who or what is entitled to the label of a 'religion', even if only to allow for religious freedom (exemption from tax, chaplaincy, definition of places of worship, dietary exemptions, religious holidays, etc.). Democratisation and human rights theory tend to standardise the definition of religion (like that of a minority), in order to treat everyone equally. Secularism thus creates religion since, in order to keep it at a distance, it must assign religion a place and therefore define it as a 'pure religion'.[13] Formatting also aims to standardise the manifestation of religion in the public sphere: 'religious practice' is thus overseen, from the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women to the erection of an *eruv* (a thread that turns a neighbourhood into a private sphere for Shabbat) around an orthodox Jewish neighbourhood, or the right to smoke hashish (a demand by the Rastafarians in the United States, which was rejected) or to drink wine (during mass in prohibitionist countries) as part of religious practice.

An institutional convergence among religions: the figure of the 'priest' or the 'minister' tends to define all religious practitioners or professionals (many Western armed forces have already appointed 'Muslim chaplains', something that does not exist in most Muslim armies); *ulama* (religious scholars) become theologians, imams and rabbis become 'parish' leaders. In the name of equality between

[13] See Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*.

believers, the law, courts and also institutions tend to format all religions in the same way. For example, in extending the principle of chaplaincy to Islam, the army and the prison authorities reinforce the institutional alignment of Islam with Christianity. In this sense we can speak of the 'churchification' of religions by courts and states.

Thus, the real issue is not an intellectual or theoretical question about Islam, but the religious practices of Muslims. The forms of religiosity in Islam today are more or less the same as those found in Catholicism, Protestantism, and even Judaism. Contemporary adherents insist more on personal faith and individual spiritual experience. Such 'born again' believers rebuild their identities from the perspective of their rediscovery of religion.

Islam does not bring a new culture or new values, but is the mirror through which Europe is looking at its own identity. The emergence of Islam in Europe is part of a general reshuffling of the religious landscape and of a new relationship between faith communities, states and societies. Forms of Islam can be found across the whole spectrum of religious attitudes (from liberal to fundamentalist). Indeed, all forms of religious fundamentalism rely on the notion of a 'pure' religion, independent of cultural variations and influences. Today's Islamic revival shares the dogmatism, communitarism, and scripturalism of American evangelist movements: both reject culture, philosophy and even theology in favour of a literalist reading of the sacred texts and an immediate understanding of truth through individual faith.[14]

Conclusion

Fundamentalist or conservative forms of religion are more in tune with the present process of globalisation and deculturation. This does not mean that fundamentalism is the future of religion. Traditional Christian churches are desperately trying to reconnect with an increasingly secular society, and they will have to find a more open discourse. The social integration of Muslims is leading to the rise of new forms of religiosity that will soon or later produce their own theological updating. But in the meantime public authorities should adopt a clear policy, coherent with both political (separation of state and religion) and social secularism (religion is not at the core of the social bond). Islam should be addressed as a religion in the framework of the national 'pacts' managing the role of religions in the public sphere: *laïcité* in France, majority-minority in Italy, official status in Austria, etc. Multiculturalism is a dead end because it ignores the specificity of the religious dimension in favour of an ill-defined 'identity'. Cultural issues (language, ethnicity) should be separated from religious issues: if Islam was an ethnic religion for

[14] Roy, *Holy Ignorance*.

the first generation, conversions (in both directions) and the rise of new generations entails an increasing disconnect between the two. And finally, instead of parroting the populists, politicians should clearly address the issue of the so-called Christian identity of Europe: the more one claims this identity, the less one goes to church. Even if the identity of Europe is Christian, it is no longer a religious identity because faith has left. That is exactly the message that the Popes have been repeating for the last 25 years – and they know best.

Nostalgia is not a policy: the issue now is to set out what European values are, and no doubt most of the faithful will be able to share them.

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