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Stefano Allievi

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Reactive identities and Islamophobia: Muslim minorities and the challenge of religious pluralism in Europe

Stefano Allievi
University of Padua, Italy

Abstract

The presence of increasing percentages of immigrants in the European social landscape is not only a quantitative fact, with consequences on several social and cultural dynamics and indicators. It produces an important qualitative change. From being a pathology, plurality is becoming physiology. Religion is a key factor in this process. There is a synchronic pluralization going on: the level of pluralization of the religious and cultural offer is increasing, making society a kaleidoscope of cultures, whose pieces are in constant movement. Islam – and in particular Islam in Europe – is often considered the most problematic and 'problematized' expression of this process. It is what we could call exceptionalism: the tendency to see Islam and Muslims as an exceptional rather than standard case. Even the mediatic perception of Islam in conflictual terms can be considered a form of exceptionalism and conflict a specific way of understanding Islam. Islamophobia is part of this phenomenon. Exceptionalism explains why Islam has become a discursive substitute of the main transformation, which is the much higher degree of cultural and religious pluralization of European societies.

Keywords

Europe, Islam, multiculturalism, pluralism, religion

Corresponding author:
Stefano Allievi, Department of Sociology, University of Padua, Via Cesarotti 10/12, Padua 35123, Italy
Email: stefano.allievi@unipd.it

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Changes in the European cultural and religious landscape

The presence of more and more significant percentages of immigrants in the European social landscape is not only a quantitative fact, with consequences on several social and cultural dynamics and indicators. Different quantitative levels of so many indicators do not only produce a quantitative change. All together, they produce and create new problematics, new processes of interrelation, etc. In a word, a qualitative change. Nothing less than a different type of society: quite different from the one imagined with the rise of the nation-state, and its founding principles.

Among the other changes, one of the more visible and visibilized is the so called 'return' of cultures – and particularly religions – in the European public space. A public space that used to be described in terms of secularization is now more and more frequently described as a territory in which a sort of 'revenge of God'[1] would be one of the main ongoing processes. The case of Islam – and particularly of Islam in Europe – is often considered the more problematic and problematized expression of this process, even though not the only one.

The presence of immigrant populations is neither culturally nor religiously 'neutral'. The immigrants do not arrive naked, so to speak: they bring with them, in their suitcases, among other things, also visions of the world, traditions, histories, faiths, practices, values, moral systems, images and symbols. And they turn to them as indispensable identity references. More than this, they often turn to these references – or, better, use them – not only individually, but also collectively and as communities, and in complex ways, through plural and richly interrelated transnational networks.

This process produces a radical change of paradigm in our interpretative criteria; and, even before, in our perception, in our experience – in our lives. One of the things that has changed dramatically, even if we hardly have a clear consciousness of this change, is our idea of the nation-state, whose elements, in the classical doctrine, are: *one* territory, *one* people, and *one* normative system (a law). An implicit element, which is not part of the doctrine but is rooted in the collective unconscious of many, in several European countries, is also *one* religion, or at least a common religious heritage, with the possible inclusion of some religious recognized minorities (this is also the 'implicit' common interpretation of classical sociology, such as in Durkheim). For different reasons, all these elements are undergoing a deep change. Territories are multiplicating (devolutions and separations, but in the other direction also processes of unification and federation). Peoples are pluralizing, through increased mobility and migrations. And even the normative systems are pluralizing (national, European, etc.). Finally, cultures and religions which are not part of any European historical heritage find their place in European societies: in a more or less 'integrated' or 'separated' way, following the different interpretations, but, apparently, with a certain success.

In the same territory, people, cultures, religions live together: they enter into contact with each other, they mix with each other or they do not, but in any case they co-exist. From being a pathology, plurality is becoming physiology. It is, or it is becoming, 'normal', and the 'norm'. Good or bad, this is the factual situation *already*. We are dealing now with the consequences of this process.

Transformations in religion

Religion is not just a 'cultural heritage' that may be on the way to being abandoned, a fact of tradition without any obvious consequences for today or with a diminishing importance. On the subjective (individual) level, it is under transformation and displaying less coherence and frequent non-linear attitudes of belonging, but significant forms of participation and involvement. On the objective (structural) level, the demand for forms of recognition and institutionalization is not on the decrease. On the contrary, from the financing of religious schools to the debates on bioethics, from the rights of minorities to the debates on their symbols, from the neo-conservative use of religious roots in public life to the return of a public symbolism that we might consider a form of 're-traditionalization' from above, there is no lack of signs of institutional visibilization of religion, at times re-inventing forms of civil religion. We may admit that the secularization paradigm is not working as expected by its more naive interpreters, and that religion, in its social presence and consequences, must be taken into consideration in the plural.

There is a *synchronic pluralization* going on, which is the most conspicuous effect of the growing mobility of men and cultures, with the co-existence on the same territory of populations and cultures that were previously distant or separated or at least far more distant and separated than they are today, as an effect of migrations, but also of other kinds of interconnections. Among other consequences, society is progressively becoming a 'society of minorities', in which majorities, if and when they exist, are always 'contextual majorities': depending on the argument, on the moment, on the role and capacity of the different actors, on their presence, on their mediatization, on the government in power, etc. Globalization and migration have had the paradoxical and certainly unintentional effect of making other remote, unknown, or misunderstood cultures 'disposable' on a global scale. They are now projected on a global scenario, and re-localized elsewhere, where diasporas bring them: a process of de-territorialization of cultures that is showing significant religious outcomes.

The most immediate and evident effect of these processes is the increase in the level of pluralization of the religious and cultural offer, which is concretely and immediately available, and which has strengthened the possibility of cultural and religious choice actually available for each individual. It is no accident that more and more often expressions such as 'mosaic of cultures' or 'religious patchwork' are used to describe this situation. These expressions highlight only the static aspect of this process: the increasing cultural pluralization of our societies, the larger offer on the supply side. This dynamic process is better described by the image, not static but dynamic, of a *kaleidoscope of cultures*, whose pieces, both large and small (old and new, former monopolistic or dominant and new actors), are in constant movement. And the overlap of the various pieces, the new ones and the existing ones, produce new forms and new shades of colour, that is, new phenomena of '*métissage*', syncretism, and cultural hybridization.

Islam(s) and Muslims in the European public space

Islam – and in particular Islam in Europe – is often considered the most problematic and 'problematized' expression of this process. In fact, if only because of the significant

numbers involved and, of course, the historical legacy associated with the relationship between Islam and the West, it offers a great deal of substance for reflection, often despite the will of Muslims themselves: from the rebirth of fundamentalisms to gender relations, passing through the relations between the state and religious communities and the dynamics of mixed marriages.

Islam in Europe has very different characteristics from those of countries where Islam is the majority religion. Specifically, the position of Islam in the public space in Europe is that of a minority in a pluralistic and secularized context: an aspect which is obvious in many ways, but the consequences of which are rarely understood. In some respects the situation of Islam in Europe could be compared to the situation of the Muslim community in the city of Mecca at the inception of Islam, before the *hijra*: the conceptual problem that both Muslims and non-Muslim observers face is that they have in mind the situation of Medina, when and where Islam has been institutionalized. Much cultural production *on* Islam and much production that comes to us *from* Muslims implicitly considers Islam a majority religion. The whole idea of *shari'a*, that of *fiqh*, as well as the idea of a political power influenced by religion, and in many respects the entire Islamic theology (for instance, the majority/minority idea of society involved in the concept of *dhimmi*), simply presupposes that Muslims constitute a majority in the population; and not only that but a majority in power. Obviously a situation which is *not* that of Muslims in Europe (nor of Muslims in the US, India, etc.).

Present-day European Islam finds itself, on the contrary, in a Medinese situation, i.e. that of a tolerated minority, sometimes stigmatized and sometimes integrated and institutionalized. And a minority internally pluralistic: by ethnic origin, juridical schools, confraternities and movements, languages, etc. In many ways the *umma*, in its many differences, is far more visible in Europe, the US, etc., than in the Muslim countries of origin, where believers can find only other persons like themselves, of the same nationality, language, belief, and interpretation of these beliefs (within a specific law school). This internal diversity has important consequences. A particularly relevant example is provided by law schools, which are so crucial for the self-interpretation of Islam. All of the *madhhab* are present in Europe; but the major difference from the situation in the countries of origin is that they mix much more easily, and individuals can find their way through them even more than in one of them. To use the words of one of my interviewees, born in Africa but of Yemeni origin and living in London: 'I am *shafii*, but I have to follow the most common *madhhab* here, which is the *hanafi* one. Personally, as far as the *hajj* is concerned I am *hanafi*, for jihad I am *maliki*, for the conception of minority I am *hanbali*'. Thus no wonder that European Muslims are beginning to speak of the European school – sometimes the western and minority one (including the United States) – as the 'fifth law school' in preparation.

Exceptionalism as a way to react to Islam

In many countries of Europe the emerging presence of Islam as an internal actor (in religious, social, cultural and political terms), and its entrance and increasing visibility in the public sphere (through collective activism and politics of recognition, but also

through mediatization, institutionalization and incorporation), is raising new problems concerning the presence of religion in the public space.

To these problems, in many cases, political parties, media, public institutions, governments – at the local, regional and national level – and parliaments tend to give specific and contextual answers, finding specific solutions, even when the issues raised, if correctly interpreted, could be compared and comparable to the issues raised by other religious (and even non-religious) groups.

We might define this tendency as *exceptionalism*, that is to say a tendency to see Islam and Muslims as an exceptional rather than standard case, one that does not fall within the cases relating to religious pluralism, and therefore requiring specific bodies, actions and specific targeted reactions, unlike those used for other groups and other religious minorities. Examples of exceptionalism include the forms of representation of Islam in various European countries, which vary from case to case but also differ with respect to the recognized practices of relations between states and religious denominations in general. The most symbolic case is the creation in various countries, such as France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, of collective bodies of institutionalized Islamic representation. Other cases concern the approval of laws banning specific dress (such as various forms of *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa,* even if often such laws are masked in a way that they do not seem specifically related only to Muslims, although they are applied only or mainly to them) or buildings (minarets in some regions of Austria – Carinthia and Vorarlberg – and Switzerland), or the introduction of specific questions or conditions when applying for citizenship or other kind of permits.

Forms of exceptionalism from a legal, political and social perspective, are, however, present in many other fields, following a pervasive trend, affecting countries with the widest range of state structures: they even include, in some countries, the language tolerated about (against) Islam and Muslims (and the existence and success of a specific anti-Islamic literature), and the creation and increasing impact of political parties for which the presence of Islam and Muslims in Europe is becoming a central point of their agenda.

Sometimes exceptionalism has a 'positive' and inclusive rather than a negative and exclusive form (even though theoretically it is equally problematic): allowing specific dress codes or behaviours (for example, in swimming pools for Muslim women), or other similar cases, particularly in the judicial field, concerning family laws.

These politics and policies concerning Islam and Muslims often contradict the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of religious communities proclaimed and enshrined for other denominations and religious minorities. And their base and conceptual foundation is neither equality of treatment nor liberty (e.g. religious freedom). Even the mediatic perception of Islam, by default, in conflictual terms, can be considered a form of exceptionalism. And conflict is a specific way of understanding Islam that relates different levels, such as conflicts about principles and ideas (from the Rushdie affair in Britain to the cartoons affair in Denmark); conflicts brought about by dramatic events caused by Islamic actors (from 9/11 and its consequences in European countries – where some of the terrorists, such as Mohamed Atta, came from – to the terrorist attacks in London and Madrid, and individual demonstrative acts, such as the assassination of Theo van Gogh); controversies discussed in public debates relating to gender issues (the

hijab controversies being the most known) and other highly symbolic issues, such as mosques and minarets, implying the perception of control over the territory, which is also a very concrete and material sign of dominion and power and, definitely, the most diffused example of conflict about Islam in Europe.[2]

Reactive identities and Islamophobia

An explanation of the refusal of Islam can be seen at various levels of complexity. A first level is the simple application (for instance, to mosques) of the classic 'Nimby' (Not in my back yard) syndrome, which we can summarize as a theoretical acceptance of the principle but not of the place. This level explains a part, but only one part, of the conflicts over mosques and pertains more to the reasons declared than to the real motivations. More complex, more subtle, more problematic to reflect over a more complex mechanism of 'reactive identities': identities that are created in reaction and in opposition to another identity – whether this other identity is real or, more often, only an imaginary, culturally constructed one (and where the principle, too – the very existence of a certain identity – is under discussion).[3]

Characteristic of such identities are, among others, the over-determination or over-semanticization of cultural elements. A prominent example in Europe today are those who are rediscovering their Christian roots, at a political, cultural, even intellectual level, much more than at the religious one, in opposition to the new arrival of Muslims. But another example, on the other hand, is among those Muslims that, in the West, are discovering or rediscovering (in reality re-inventing) their Islamic roots through forms of closure, self-ghettoization, etc. The mechanism is the same, and testifies to the fact that it is not attributable to one or the other group as a specific characteristic but, if anything, it is characteristic of the present historical period. Even the use of self-definitions, by both Muslims and non-Muslim Europeans, in terms of 'community' (an ideological rather than descriptive expression), is part of this process.

Reactive identities produce conflicts, especially conflicts on and about symbols, and particularly religious symbols, because they are well placed to be exploited and used like a flag, around which consensus can be obtained. Among those who use them with greater efficacy there are those that we could call 'political entrepreneurs of Islamophobia'. The political parties that take Islamophobia as a central part of their programme, and at the same time as an efficient method of gaining consensus, are in strong expansion in most European countries. And they systematically use the conflicts over mosques (opened by them, or on which they intervene even when they are not present locally) as a means of visibilization, obtaining notable results on this plane in terms of success. The main problem of their activism in the conflicts is that they have an evident interest in stoking up the conflict, but none in finding a solution to it. Their political success proceeds and increases as long as the conflict remains open: the moment the conflict is in some way resolved, and the tension and the attention disappear, the political entrepreneurs of Islamophobia lose their centrality, their visibility and their consensus. And it is for this reason that they are the worst enemies of any attempt to find a solution to the conflict: simply, they have no interest in doing so. What makes their role for the whole of society and not only for Muslims particularly problematic is that society, on the contrary, has no interest in protracting the conflicts, which are socially, culturally, politically

and also economically costly, and in the long run produce secondary effects that are strongly negative on the processes of integration and on the actors themselves involved in the conflict.

Finally, this radical form of legitimation of the conflict leads to the use of a language about the adversary (and especially Muslims, wholesale so to speak: not some specific groups or certain individuals) of such roughness that we would refuse to accept it in the case of any other social group. To understand the gravity of this it would be sufficient to substitute – in many articles in newspapers, in public speech by political figures, social actors, intellectuals, also in official documents – the word 'Muslim' with the word 'Jew', and see if this language would be considered legitimate by the same actors that use it, and if the things said would be considered acceptable. Naturally this is true also for the positions of some Islamic groups in reference to the West, Christians, Jews, infidels, Israel, etc.

These sentiments are often resumed as the result of a climate of Islamophobia, an expression that has become much-used in all European countries where the Islamic presence is important, among experts and especially among social actors, first of all obviously Muslims themselves.[4]

The word Islamophobia has, however, an unpleasant ring of victimization to it. While it does refer to social facts that do definitely exist, and which it is important to monitor, its use is particularly seductive for Muslims, putting all the responsibility for its existence on to their host societies. Islamophobia does not regard only, nor perhaps even mainly, the media, which are almost more an effect than a cause of it, even though they act as multipliers and a driving force. It is present in politics and theologies, as well as in academia, at various levels and in the most diverse disciplines. It seems to me, however, that one of the successful elements of the term among the Islamic communities and *politically correct* spheres close to it is also to discharge the communicative responsibility of Islamophobia entirely on to non-Muslims. Islamophobia indeed has a meaning that is not always etymologically correct: what it signals is not necessarily *fear* of Islam. It can be something else and even worse: hate that is unmotivated or motivated by other than fear, the expression (one of the many possible) of aggressive drives that do not have their origin in the object on which they work themselves out (so not fear *of Islam*). But it can also be a bland fear, a reasoned preoccupation which can be motivated rationally concerning the evolutions of society (of which the preoccupation over the building of mosques can be a legitimate part), which the word Islamophobia radicalizes and reduces to an extreme kind. This does not mean that Islamophobia does not exist, but the term used intensively reduces all reactive phenomena to the same kind, as it is not able to grasp differences that are subtle in order and grade, ending up sometimes by constructing the object of analysis instead of defining it correctly. It might be more correct to speak – and it is certainly not less worrying – of the growth of an anti-Muslim climate of feeling in Europe. Many reports today enumerate example upon example. If anything, the problem is that these long lists constitute only a sum, not yet an explanation.

Conclusions: On conflict and change

There is in the background to the fear of Islam what seems to be a long-lasting trend in western societies, increasingly manifested in recent decades: the generalization of the

social construction of fear, its systematic spreading, its omnipresence in the media, its political exploitation. And as a consequence the spread of mentalities, even before policies, of obsession with security. The phenomenon is not new in itself. But it seems that it is new in its modes of operation. And naturally in the choice of the object (the scapegoat?) of reference.

One of its effects is the steady disappearance from the public scene of other diversities: polarization, at present, is on the Islamic one. This is keeping up an incomparable level of visibility in respect to other cultural and religious phenomena, and also in respect to other problems that immigration does create, and which seem to have been pushed to the sides of the stage, including those of security, deviance, crime, even if extremely popular with the media. The only possible way out from this tendency seems to be a progressive de-Islamization of the discussion on Muslims in Europe: a way out to the 'exceptionalism' attributed by default to Islam.

It is no accident that this conflict is often about symbols rather than modes of behaviour and social practices. However, sociologically, conflict has a positive function. Furthermore, it is basic and, as the classics of sociology have taught us, from Marx to Weber and Simmel, cannot be eliminated. After all, crisis prompts the discussion of a problem. Crisis and conflict also help us to discover how far we can go and which social boundaries cannot be exceeded. Leadership is forged in conflict. In conflict we have to ask ourselves about a sense of common responsibility which must not produce harmful excesses that may rebound on those who produce them: we measure our real strength, but also that of others, and that of society, its rules, its tools for regulation. Through conflict we test who we are, but also who others are and the idea of alterity. In conflict situations we learn to measure the difference between what we are, what we want, and what we can obtain. Moreover, conflict is a means of bringing to the surface of consciousness what lies and bubbles in the depths. Taking opinions to extremes has a function, which is precisely this: to make visible what is not usually visible, make the unconscious conscious, the unaware aware and letting words say what is not usually said.

As is the case with couples and families, the healthy ones are not those that do not experience conflict, but those in which conflict finds channels to emerge, be dealt with, and resolved. When this does not happen, families break up, or their members continue to live in a state of constant unhappiness. As happens in democracy, which after all is a method not for avoiding conflict but facing it without recourse to violence. Society is conflictual by definition. In a real sense, conflict is the only way we have to avoid war. By taking it into consideration and managing it, we manage to avoid as much as possible the explosions of violence.

On the other hand, precisely because, for the reasons set out above, conflict is necessary, constitutive of society, physiological, and inevitable (in particular in the presence of such significant changes: and the fact that Islam is today the second religion in Europe cannot be considered a detail of history), we can hypothesize that in its present form, with its extensive radicalization and visibility, it is only one inevitable stage, even if this stage is unlikely to be short (or perhaps has yet to peak), that is unfolding while we wait to find forms of regulation more suited to the conflict itself. The fact that this level of conflict can be considered more a phase than a destiny may be indicated by the

long-term trends we are seeing within the Islamic communities of Europe – tendencies that could generally be referred to as the Europeanization of Islam, i.e. the adaptation of its cultural and normative framework (a Europeanization that ranges from gender relations to theological changes, from forms of family and cultural integration to economic integration and consumer models).

In this sense we can better understand why exceptionalism is such a diffused frame of interpretation. It is because Islam in Europe represents a sort of transitional object: a discursive substitute that represents, and at the same time hides, the main transformation, which is the much higher degree of cultural and religious pluralization of European societies, to which we referred in the beginning.

Islam in Europe is changing. However, in the process of making itself European, by becoming a European reality and an internal social actor, it is also changing Europe. From now on it will not be possible to understand the history and the social and religious evolution of Europe without taking its Islamic component into account. In the same way it will not be possible to understand the history, social and theological evolution of Islam without taking into account its European component. The history of Europe has become Islamic history – at least in part – and the history of Islam has become European history. Both will be better understood as key examples of a process of pluralization that is affecting both Europe and the Muslim countries from which Muslims in Europe come.

Notes

1. From different points of view see G. Kepel. (1994) *The Revenge of God*. Cambridge: Polity Press; J. Casanova (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press*;* P. Jenkins (2002) *The Next Christendom*. New York: Oxford University Press and P. Jenkins (2009) *God's Continent*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. S. Allievi (2009) *Conflict over Mosques in Europe: Policy Issues and Trends* London: Alliance Publishing Trust, and S. Allievi (ed.) (2010) *Mosques in Europe. Why a Solution Has Become a Problem.* London: Alliance Publishing Trust.
3. On reactive identities, see S. Allievi (2005) 'Conflicts, Cultures and Religions: Islam in Europe as a Sign and Symbol of Change in European Societies', in *Yearbook of Sociology of Islam* 6: 18–27, and M. van Bruinessen and S. Allievi (2010) *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*. London: Routledge.
4. The term has been introduced widely in the debate on the presence of Islam in Europe by Runnymede Trust (1997) *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. London. For an overview, see C. Allen (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate. See also, S. Allievi (2005) 'How the Immigrant Has Become Muslim: Public Debates on Islam in Europe', *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 21(2): 135–163.