

## **The Challenge of Muslim Citizenship in Europe**

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About 1,574,000 Muslims (3% of the Italian population) are living in Italy, the majority of which of foreign origin. They constitute 29,2% of the migrant community and only 30% are European Muslims (from Albania, Moldavia, Kosovo), whereas 52,7% are from Africa (37,8% from North Africa).<sup>1</sup> The renown Egyptian journalist has strongly criticized Muslim communities living in the West, affirming that they «have become more sensitive, intolerant and inclined to violence at the first sign of friction or prejudice to what they think is a criticism of or attacking Islamic traditions» and adding that «Many brought with them many outdated traditions and backward customs, such as the demand for polygamy, which is a crime punishable by law, and the treatment of women in a way that involves an abuse of their dignity».<sup>2</sup> Some Muslims living in Europe, in fact, appear to conceive identity as a closed space in which to close themselves. Religious traditions have become more important than religious experience, the form has become more important than the person, more than his mind, his heart and his conscience.

In Arabo-Islamic societies, modernity has established a complex relationship with heritage, in which each of them – modernity and tradition – have managed to adapt to the other, while, at the same time, subduing it; each have managed to reject the other, while, at the same time, fighting it. This has resulted in a complicated process, in which both the modernist and traditionalist cultures in the Arabo-Islamic world were constantly reformulated and remodeled. This dialectic has been the principal mechanism of modernity's internal debate. We are not facing two separated, or even conflicting, worlds, but rather a process of continuous remodeling, in which the two cultures merge into a special blend, giving birth to a 'fake modernity' – for example, in terms of lifestyles, public views and behaviors that can neither be described as traditional nor as modern, but are a distorted mixture of both. We are speaking here of a 'third culture', which relies on principles contrasting with those that have given rise to modernity as it is understood in the West. However, these contrasting principles do not necessarily stem from traditions and heritage, for this fake modernity disfigures tradition as much as it disfigures the authentic manifestations of modernity. The best proof of this is that this fake modernity rejects the rational and reasonable dimension in both of them, i.e. the reason on which the Western modern civilization was founded and the reason which lies at the basis of Islamic heritage and civilization. This fake modernity rather tends to lean on mazes of irrationality and the exaltation

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<sup>1</sup> Source: ISMU, IDOS.

<sup>2</sup> Salama Ahmad Salama, *Majallat wijhat nazhar*, n. 86, March 2006.

of innate, instinctive feelings. This third culture reproduces itself in the midst of growing contradictions, which originate at the level of its basic components: tradition and modernity. In summary, it is possible to say that modernity, in Arabo-Islamic societies, has developed the rigid, irrational elements of heritage and tradition, while these two have developed the formal, non-authentic aspects of modernity. Muslim migrants living in Europe have brought with them the contradictions arising from this problematic dialectic, whereas the old European Muslim communities, such as the Croatian one, do not seem to be affected by it.

However, Muslim communities living in Europe also face difficulties caused by the faults and drawbacks of different integration models. Integration itself is a problematic term, because it is something that can only happen between rigid forms. The actual challenge would be to replace the idea of integration with the idea of interaction. Pope Benedict, for example, has invited to a productive pluralism, which guarantees interaction between and contribution from everyone in constructing the common good. This model contrasts starkly with what can be called negative pluralism, which claims, on the contrary, that, on the road of dialogue and coexistence, "it is necessary to overcome the differences and dissimilarities that distinguish one culture from another."<sup>3</sup> Productive pluralism does not impose concessions on the individual because it is aware that what distinguishes cultures one from the other is precisely the contribution they have to offer each other.

One could go so far as to say that many laws, by preferring the criterion of the majority to that of justice, enact the negative pluralism described above, which excludes difference. Indeed, France, one of the oldest Western democracies - and one of the most historically rich in its defense of rights and freedoms - effectively forbid the display of religious symbols in public spaces with its ratification of the so-called anti-veil law on April 11, 2011. By doing so, it became a state in which the Constitution vouchsafes difference and religious pluralism, while its legislation forbids the expression thereof.

Switzerland also offers a clear example of exclusion of diversity enshrined in law. On November 29, 2009, it passed a referendum in which the majority decided the architectural shape that all mosques must take in that country (though it is unclear what constitutional right allows the promulgation of laws that concern only one specific social group). In both cases, the justifications offered lead us to a single rule, which clearly illustrates the lengths to which rationality based on exclusion can go: the rule which affirms that *equality in injustice is just*.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Koichiro Matsuura, *Majallat al-Siyasa al-Dawliyya*, January/ February 2002, p. 95 n. 147, Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies, Cairo, Egypt.

Practices of exclusion touch every aspect of life - at times unintentionally - while the divisions and barriers between the different "teams" within a single country remain entrenched. A Jewish professor at the Sorbonne once explained how the famed *saucisse*, the national dish of France, had become an expression of discrimination against Muslims and Jews, who do not eat pork. Members of the two religions were left with only two choices: abandon public feasts, or pretend to be vegetarians in order to avoid hearing the inevitable, "Look! They don't eat *saucisse*!"

In other societies, the various forms of religious expression have the benefit of greater protections, but only if their presence in the public square does not go beyond the practice of their own rituals. In such cases, religion is reduced to simple liturgies, emptied of any social significance. This results in profound divisions within societies whenever they are faced with the ultimate questions of life and death, for example with regard to issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and organ donation. In cases like these, the incapacity of scientific reason to formulate an ethical judgment is plain, and society's lack of experience with positive pluralism, which could at least offer a common language for debating such issues, becomes equally obvious. Instead, society always relies on the criterion of the majority, rather than that of justice. In summary, in order to fight against the exclusion of the *different* society sometimes excludes the *difference*. But when religious experience is one of the most important elements of identity, the exclusion of the difference actually becomes the exclusion of the person. The exclusion of diversity from the public space means that adaptation and not interaction is the mark of the relationship of immigrants with their new society. In difference itself there is no evil, which can instead be found in the rejection of difference, since, as Edgard Pisani writes, "intolerance is the rejection of difference; the search for identification carried out with bloody hands; the rejection of any form of independence and diversity. Intolerance rejects the exchange of ideas because it disperses hatred, and it refuses coexistence because that would mean accepting diversity."<sup>4</sup>

The problem here is integration by «subtraction»: to integrate Muslims, for example, it is sometimes believed that one needs removing the crosses. Julia Kristeva, Jürgen Habermas and all those thinkers who clearly see the dangers of transforming secularism into an ideology have strongly criticized this extreme concept of secularism. «Negative pluralism» has changed the public space from a melting pot (which favors encounter and positive interaction between the different cultural components of society) into boundaries that keep all these components apart. Attempts to integrate immigrants into their new societies have just made cultural and religious boundaries invisible in the public space. Today, all European metropolises host «parallel societies» where Muslim immigrants live.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Pisani, *Fi Muwajaha 'Adam al-Tasamuh*, trans. As'ad Halim, "Risaia," UNESCO press, June 1992, p. 34.

However, public space should not be a neutral place in order to accommodate everyone. The public space *is* "the others" and nothing else. The space cannot be public if there are no "others". The true public space is such if everyone belongs to it; a space that eliminates everyone's identities, no longer belongs to anyone: we cross it as ghosts, not as people. It is an empty space. In conclusion, integrating "traditions" is impossible, but it is possible to bring together individuals with different lifestyles and beliefs. Here is **the great problem of England or France: they try to integrate symbols, not people**. But symbols cannot integrate, whereas people can.

Since only people can integrate and not religious traditions, it is important to ask what are the integration strategies of these people? What are Muslims living in Europe really looking for? Many studies on Islam revolve around themes such as "Islam and democracy", "Islam and modernity", "Islam and secularism", "Islam and women", etc. These researches do not consider ordinary Muslims. However, Muslim laypeople are the primary 'space' where the attempt is made to harmonize Islamic tradition – in the form it assumes today in the context of current Islamic societies – with the values of the Western socio-cultural context in which these Muslims reside. In the past, Muslim laypeople were difficult to reach and identify, a fact that likely contributed to their marginalization in scientific research. Today, however, they are well within the scope of scientific research, thanks to modern communication technologies, which allow the questions Muslim laypeople ask themselves and their religious authorities about the relationship between their faith and the culture of the Western society they live in to be stored in easily accessible archives. These questions, along with their answers, make up what is technically called a *fatwā*. These *fatwās* are now publicly available on many websites, which, in Europe, have taken the place of Islamic religious authorities. Such websites are the closest and easiest way for Muslim laypeople to contact religious experts. Therefore, researchers can now shift from analyzing Muslims' answers to fixed lists of questions, to analyzing Muslims' freely asked questions about their own lives. Accordingly, I collected and analyzed a sample of almost a thousand questions asked by Muslims residing in Europe and the West to investigate how the complex interplay between tradition and modernity observed in the Arabo-Islamic world has moved and (perhaps) undergone changes in the Western context.

The websites included for the analysis in this study are *islamQA*, *islamweb* and the *European Council for Fatwā and Research* (ECFR).<sup>5</sup> The most important result of this sample study is that Muslims' concerns and hopes in Europe fall far from the spotlight created by the mass media. Theological problems, disputes over Qur'ān interpretation, disagreements among Islamic juridical schools, the issue of religious symbols in the public space, and the building of mosques attract only marginal interest among Muslims residing in Europe. This result is even more

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<sup>5</sup> For a complete account of this research see Wael Farouq, *Conflicting Arab Identities. Language, tradition and modernity*, Muta, Milan (Italy), 2018.

significant if one considers that those who request *fatwās*, the *mustaftīs*, are pious individuals keen on finding a harmonious relationship between their religious tradition and their life in European societies. In fact, a large number of Muslims in Europe do not feel the need to ask for a *fatwā* at all, and may not experience any tension between their life in the West and Islam, while still other Muslims do not feel the need to ask for a *fatwā* outside the religious group they belong to, be it a Salafist group or one of the various currents of political Islam. The latter category, however, is small and has little influence, as indicated by the number of affiliates to their organizations. The best example is perhaps the ECFR, whose founders and members are clearly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, the number of *fatwās* issued by this Council and the number of its website's visitors are exiguous compared to that of other Islamic websites.

This leads to another important observation. Muslims residing in Europe appear to distinguish the private religious sphere from political activity and public engagement. The number of Muslims visiting websites with a clear political orientation – either governmental ones, such as the Egyptian *Dār al-Iftā'*, or those run by opposition movements, such as the ECFR – is very low compared with the number of Muslims visiting Salafist websites. The latter enjoy the highest percentage of visits and are non-political, even if frequently they are religiously conservative and even extremist, fanatic and close-minded (*islamQA's* founder, for example, is the author of a famous *fatwā* against Mickey Mouse). The distrust of politics and consequent abstention from political activity is one of the main elements these immigrants have carried with them from their home countries – a product of the distorted and distorting mixture of Islamic social traditions that have resulted from a process of forced modernization, in which modern state institutions were introduced into Islamic societies, but emptied of the meanings and values that had led to the creation of those institutions. This distrust of politics can be readily observed in many questions about the possibility (or not) to defraud the state in order to obtain a benefit, because the experience of the modern state south of the Mediterranean Sea has produced a great distance between the state and its citizens, who have ended up seeing state institutions as mere tools of oppression and tyranny.

What truly concerns Muslims in European societies is their relationship with others, both Muslims and non-Muslims. This relationship is the subject of 45% of the questions. These are all personal questions, concerning individuals, and they rarely touch on public issues. If we add questions about acts of worship – in other words, about Muslims' personal relationship with God – this percentage increases to 63%. This leads to the conclusion that Muslims are mainly concerned about how to fit into European societies as individuals, not as a community or as a religious minority. The most religious Muslims in Europe – those who go to the trouble to request

a *fatwā* – are striving to adapt to society. They are neither trying to oppose it by forming an antagonist camp nor do they appear willing to withdraw into their religious community.

This study shows the person coming to light in full force, in all its complexity, diversity, contradictions and individuality. It shows flesh-and-bone Muslims who, like all other human beings, struggle to find their psychosocial, spiritual and material equilibrium in the modern context, within the network of relationships that constitute their environment and daily existence.

Putting the person back at the center, however, is useful not only for freeing us from harmful stereotypes in Western societies. Most importantly, it helps outline with great clarity the true crisis of Islamic societies – both at the individual and collective level – whose origin can be attributed to the mixture of a stiffened tradition and a distorted modernity. The contents of the analyzed questions clearly indicate that the main driver of people's asking is their fear of breaking the 'rules' and committing sin. Muslims do not worry anymore about knowing what is good and what is bad. Good and bad have lost their meanings, because now there are the 'rules'. Following them exempts one from asking dangerous questions that might lead them astray from religion. Muslims have begun to see life as a difficult test that a zealous student can pass if he studies all the lessons and memorizes the rules, to the extent that the fear of committing sin has eventually turned into the fear of life itself. Everything has become *bid'a* (heterodoxy), and every *bid'a* perdition that leads to Hell.

As noted above, Muslims living in Europe show insignificant interest in public affairs. Almost no questions are asked about joining parties or participating in civil society's activities. However, this is only to be expected: a person who gives up the responsibility to formulate judgments on his or her own personal life cannot be expected to formulate judgments on society as a whole. Essentially the only Muslims engaging in public life are those involved with political Islam. However, even they cannot formulate new judgments, but simply invite others to obey the rules, or the *Šarī'a* – the very same *Šarī'a* that, thanks to the *fatwā*, was once a space for creativity and renewal.

This study reveals well how the contradictions of fake modernity become even more complex in the case of Muslim migrants in European societies, where the identity crisis and the meaning production crisis are as acute and serious as in Arabo-Islamic societies. In fact, in the time of postmodern globalization - the time of fragmented and artificial identities - Europeans are constantly escaping from their past, whereas Arabs are constantly escaping toward their past.

Two World Wars have left deep wounds in European consciousness, so that any attempt to generate – or define – a meaning for life, the person, society or history is seen as an exclusion of whatever remains outside this meaning. This attitude, however, is a threaten to pluralism. On the Arabo-Islamic side, colonialism and all its consequences, such as political, economic and political subordination, have left a deep wound in Arabo-Islamic consciousness, so that every attempt to generate meaning for life, the person, society or history is seen as a reaffirmation of Arabo-Islamic humiliation and as a threat to Arabs' pure origin, preserving which has become the only possibility to wash the shame of the love for the oppressor and its imitation.

To summarize using a metaphor, Western society today resembles a man that has decided to castrate himself, because he does not want to generate an evil son, whereas Arabo-Islamic society is like a man who kills his sons because they do not resemble an ancestor he has never known.