

EUROPEAN MUSLIMS
AND THE SECULAR STATE

JOCELYNE CESARI
AND SEAN MCLOUGHLIN

EUROPEAN MUSLIMS AND THE SECULAR STATE

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Ottavia Schmidt di Friedberg,
colleague and friend, for whom research was an intellectual endeavour, a
shared experience and a personal pleasure.*

European Muslims and the Secular State

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Preface

Following workshops in Paris on 24 June 2002 and 3 February 2003, the culmination of the European Commission funded research project on *Islam, Citizenship and the Dynamics of European Integration*, was a final international symposium at La Sorbonne, 30 June to 1 July 2003. Having completed the project, one of the network's commitments to the Commission was a published volume which network organizer and coordinator, Jocelyne Cesari, duly negotiated with Ashgate. Once she had set out the shape of the volume and secured all the contributions, Jocelyne invited me to share the responsibility for reading and editing each individual chapter and, as the only native speaker of English in the network, to produce the final manuscript.

Being a member of the network and editing this book have underlined two simple but important things for me about 'similarity' and 'difference'. Firstly, it is possible to establish a common comparative framework for describing and analysing general processes concerning Islam and Muslims throughout Europe for all the variety that is entailed therein. Indeed, the collective efforts of the contributors in effect 'map' what I consider to be the most important social-scientific dimensions of our interdisciplinary field: the recognition and regulation of Muslims in European nation-states; the consequences of different contexts of migration for Muslims; the institutionalization of Islamic movements, organizations and leaderships; social divisions of class, gender and generation; and the continuing impact of local-global political crises. Secondly, such comparative work firmly puts the familiar 'in context', so that an understanding of particular variations on a theme come much more clearly into view. Certainly this is my experience of reflecting back on Britain from a European perspective.

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Seán McLoughlin
Leeds, 30 March 2005



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Finally, special thanks to our colleague and friend, Seán McLoughin, for his careful reading and editing of the present volume.

Jocelyne Cesari

On behalf of the Network of Comparative Research on Islam and Muslims in Europe
Cambridge, 30 March 2005



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Introduction

Jocelyne Cesari

Islam's presence in Europe is a direct consequence of the paths of immigration established in the early 1960s, leading from former European colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Since the official end of labour migration in 1974, the integration of immigrant populations has become an irreversible fact, particularly as a result of policies on family reunification. These have contributed to the recomposition of 'Muslim' families in Europe and the continent's noticeable increase in family size. In such a context, the assertion of Islamic faith and identity becomes a major issue in terms of the sedentarization of immigrant populations. Throughout Europe, Islam's public visibility is at the root of much questioning, doubt and, often violent, opposition regarding newcomers to the West.

Many researchers in Europe consider that it is Islam's status as a minority religion and culture within a democratic and secularized context which is the decisive element in the transformation of both Muslim practices and their relationship to Islam. Such an approach, however, often amounts to no more than a description of the modalities according to which Muslims adapt to their new social context (see Lewis and Schnapper, 1994; Shadid and Van Kongingsveld, 1995; 2002a; 2002b). This univocal approach takes for granted the political features of the host societies, and fails to look into the transformations of secularism, nationalism and multiculturalism produced within the dominant societies as a result of the establishment of a new religion and new cultures.

In contrast, another, more innovative, approach to these issues seeks to understand the modes of interaction between Muslim groups and the different segments of Western societies. This approach implies a refusal to essentialize either the minority or the dominant culture and leads to an understanding of the social construction of Muslim communities in terms of the dialectical relationship between group resources and their social environment (see Cesari, 2002 and 2004). This is the approach adopted in the research project *Islam, Citizenship and European Integration*, conducted by the Network of Comparative Research on Islam and Muslims in Europe (see Cesari 2003, www.euro-islam.info). This project, which provides much of the basis for the present work, is greatly indebted to a method of research that accords primary importance to a dialectical process in the analysis of interactions between groups and cultures – particularly when the recognition of one group by another dominant group is at stake (see Sakai, 1999), as is the case with Muslims in Western democracies. The contributors to this book have therefore chosen to analyze both the cultural and political principles that structure the organization of religion within Western democracies and the influence of these principles on Muslims' adaptation to secularized societies. In this volume,

we present the various interactions between Muslims and secularized spaces in order to apprehend the changes these interactions may imply for both Muslims and Islam itself.

Church-State Relations and its Influence on the Secularization of Islamic Institutions

Throughout Europe, the emergence of Islam has reopened the file – until very recently considered ‘case closed’ – on the relationship between religion and the state. The very diversity of Euro-Islamic issues is nevertheless a reflection of the specific political and cultural features of individual European countries, rather than a sign of any supposed exceptionality of Islam.

As it is understood by the various European nations, secularism may be characterized according to one of three primary modalities: cooperation between the state and the churches; total separation between the state and religion; or the existence of a state religion. In each case, however, the question of the institutionalization of Islam constitutes a problem which has no equivalent in American society. Unlike the situation in the United States, European ‘secularism’ means more than the protection of freedom of religion and the autonomy of religious organizations; it is also accompanied by a certain cooperation between church and state. Thus – as Silvio Ferrari’s chapter demonstrates – the secularization of Islam is witnessed in the emergence of Islamic institutions adapted to the dominant model of church-state relations in the countries in question.

The influence of dominant political institutions, however, is not limited to church-state relations. It can also be seen in the political responses to the social and economic marginality that currently characterizes the status of many European Muslims. The socio-economic condition of European Muslims is one of great vulnerability. In every country in Europe, the unemployment rate amongst Muslims, immigrants and European-born, is higher than the national average. In the UK, for example, individuals of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage are considered to be amongst the most disadvantaged, having a level of unemployment three times higher than that of even other minority communities.

This kind of relegation to the margins has important consequences for the status of Islam in Europe. As Valérie Amiraux demonstrates in her chapter, the association between Islam and poverty has significant political consequences in terms of the equal treatment of Islam *vis-à-vis* other religions. This association also makes it more difficult to identify instances of discrimination specifically on the basis of religion, as racism and economic discrimination are often inextricably bound up with one another. The perception of social differences in terms of religion is very much a factor within the various spaces of Europe, as many of the contributors to this volume (Amiraux, Jacobsen, Jonker, Martín-Muñoz and López-Sala, Saint-Blancat and Perocco) demonstrate.

In looking at the studies contained in this volume, we should also note the intensification, in the majority of the public arenas of Europe, of a hostile and essentializing discourse on Islam. This ‘meta-narrative’ (Cesari, 2004) is a factor in

the construction of Muslim identifications with Islam, particularly amongst the younger generations. In other words, many young Muslims in Europe are answering the pejorative or negative exceptionalism characteristic of mainstream discourse on Islam with an exceptionalism of their own that is at once positive and defensive.

One of the consequences of the events of 11 September 2001 has been the exacerbation of the stigmatization of Muslims, something effected by the linking of Islam, terrorism, and the socioeconomic conditions of the European suburban or inner city ghettos. As Jocelyne Cesari's chapter demonstrates, the '9/11' terrorist attacks have indeed resulted in both an increasingly antagonistic tone in mainstream discourse and stricter policies on immigration and security throughout Europe. A further consequence of the events of 9/11 in the European sphere has been a general questioning of the idea of multiculturalism. Multicultural policy is seen as a contributing factor to economic marginality and to religious segregation, insofar as it reinforces the exceptionality of Muslim immigrants without providing them with a means for real social advancement. While it is still too early to measure the consequences of this political climate on the religious behavior of European Muslims, it is likely that this situation will result in the growth of a reactive and defensive use of Islam (Cesari, 2004).

As the studies contained in the second section of this volume show, the particular institutional and political conditions of European nations have also had the unexpected result of influencing both the emergence of prominent Muslim figures, and the strategies they adopt. Gerdien Jonker's chapter demonstrates how the strategies of leading Muslims have been shaped by the 'structures of opportunity' offered by the society in which they live. In Germany, for example, the sole possible point of entry to public space for Muslims as 'Muslims' before 9/11, was the space of inter-religious dialogue. Similarly, Thijl Sunier indicates how the norms and values of Dutch society have strongly influenced the debate on Islam and Islam's assimilation into the public sphere – whether it is a question of 'pillarization', of multiculturalism, or of tolerance towards homosexuality. His study illustrates the evolution of the representational dynamic of Muslim populations: while Muslim communities once identified themselves primarily on the basis of ethnicity, they are identifying themselves with increasing frequency in terms of religion. In the past three years, the debate has become focused around the status of *imams* and their ability to promote the 'core values' of Dutch society in their communities.

As Chantal Saint-Blancat and Fabio Perroco correctly emphasize in their chapter, it is the local level, more than the level of governmental policy or Islamic organizations, which is a crucial space for the redefinition of Islamic leadership. This is particularly so because of the emergence of a new generation of leaders, who act as 'mediators' between Muslim communities and dominant institutions (local authorities, the media, the Church). In France, as Alexandre Caeiro demonstrates, the process of Islam's institutionalization begun by the Minister of the Interior has restructured the balance of power amongst the different influential figures. A tense relationship continues to exist between those bureaucratic leaders recognized by the French government and the preference of lay Muslims for those

leaders associated with transnational movements such as the Muslim Brothers and/or in touch with the daily reality of local Muslim communities.

Seán McLoughlin's study confirms the growing influence in the British public sphere of reformist leaders who trace their Islamic heritage to the ideas of movements including the Muslim Brothers but, more especially in the UK, the Jama'at-i Islami of the Indian-subcontinent. Indeed, it would seem that Europe has become a new centre for the expansion of reformist movements such as the Muslim Brothers or the Jama'at-i Islami. Their positions on democracy and European culture should be clearly distinguished from those of the Wahhabis or post-Salafis. The former promote an inclusive attitude, arguing in favor of Islam's compatibility and engagement with the ideals and norms of democracy, whereas the latter take up a defensive position, refusing any form of adaptation to the European environment. To label all of these groups 'fundamentalist' only makes for confusion, and reinforces both an essentializing discourse and the construction of so-called Muslim exceptionalism.

The Influence of Secularism on Religious Practice

Secularism is more than the functional separation of politics and religion: it also, and especially, signifies the decline of religion's influence in society. Particularly in the European public sphere, the term has an ideological character, and has become, through various modes of political and cultural representation, one of the cornerstones of European identity. It is in this way that Islam's establishment in Europe may be seen as a potential threat to secularism as the cultural norm – a fact attested to, for example, by the heated nature of France's debate on the 'Islamic headscarf', or *hijab*. The justifications given for this fear of Islam invoke *ad nauseum* the commonplace that 'in Islam, there is no separation between the political and the religious'.

Certainly, none of the post-colonial states of the Muslim world have rejected the use of Islam as a means of creating a national community. In Muslim countries Islam is always either the state religion or under state control, even in nominally 'secular' nations such as Turkey or Iraq. As a result, the state becomes the custodian of the legitimate interpretation of tradition. The result is the devitalization of Islamic thought, not only on the question of political power, but on any topic of cultural or social import. That is to say, it is not that 'the Muslim mind' is somehow lacking in critical faculties but, rather, that this critical faculty has been stifled by authoritarian political control.

The establishment of Muslim communities in Europe and the United States therefore provides a release from the 'iron grip' of authoritarian Muslim states on Islamic tradition. In concrete terms, this 'liberation' can take a variety of forms. What is common to all, however, is the increasing individualization of Islamic practice – which should, nonetheless, not be taken to mean that Islam becomes a private matter.

The phenomenon of individualization has a variety of facets, of which the most important is perhaps the centrality of the notion of individual responsibility in

religious choice. This individualization is accompanied by a growing distrust amongst believers of religious mediation – whether this mediation is on the part of a cleric, a religious leader, or a religious institution. This is something demonstrated by Gema Martín-Muñoz and Ana López-Sala in their chapter on religious practice amongst immigrant Muslim women in Spain. The suspicion of institutionalized or bureaucratized authority has precedents in the history of Islam: in Sufi practice, for example. However, the distrust of religious authority assumes a new tone in a secularized context, as Gerdien Jonker shows in her analysis of Sufi movements in Germany.

The principle mode of individualization among European Muslim populations takes the form of an attempt to reconcile the maximum amount of personal freedom with a belief in a more or less well-defined form of transcendence, which can then be adjusted to the constraints of the dominant societies. An adjustment to the boundaries between public and private space proper to the various European cultures can be seen in the ever more frequent relocation of religious practice to private spaces (praying in one's home, for example, rather than praying at the workplace). These various readjustments are accompanied by an increased emphasis on Islamic values, in contrast to orthopraxis. Religious practice proper is often limited to the observance of key rites of passage: circumcision, marriage, and burial.

It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to confuse the individualization of religious faith with an automatic decline in religious practice. As Nadia Fadil, Christine Jacobsen and Gema Martín-Muñoz and Ana López-Sala demonstrate, the relationship between individualization and faith is more complex than it might initially appear. In fact, for some Muslims, especially amongst the younger generations, faith is seen as something indistinguishable from the observance of Islamic laws. Here, religion is indeed defined as orthopraxis: in other words, as the literal observance of religious prescriptions, as well as the demand to embody them in one's daily life. Identification with Islam thus offers the individual a way to structure everyday reality, and provides a framework that s/he can use to organize and give sense to his/her life.

For the young women in Belgium interviewed by Nadia Fadil, such orthopraxis can actually mean emancipation from cultural, ethnic, and patriarchal constraints. Affirming one's 'Muslimness' becomes a way of affirming one's individuality, and of distancing oneself from the male discourse on women in Islam. Religious affirmation can also take on a more social connotation. Gerdien Jonker notes that, in Germany, 'lay' Sufi practice tends to emphasize ideas of spirituality and transcendence less, and the cohesion of the religious community and the religion-based activities that reinforce it (mutual aid societies, social activities, and so on) more. Christine Jacobsen similarly describes the Muslim Youth of Norway's investment in civic, social and educational activities.

This trend of constituting one's individuality through the affirmation of one's 'Muslimness' is naturally extremely diverse in terms of religious involvement, ranging from strict orthopraxis to more ethnically-oriented forms of religious participation. It is necessary, however, to make a distinction between those forms of religious affirmation which encourage openness and dialogue with the 'host'

society (see Jacobsen, Fadil, Martín-Muñoz and López-Sala) and those which reject the secularized or non-Muslim environment. The practitioners of the latter are often disciples of transnational movements promoting a variety of Islamic 'fundamentalisms', such as the Deobandis, Tablighis or Wahhabis described by Jonathan Birt.

What these transnational movements have in common is the endorsement of a return to the Qur'an and the imitation of the life and *sunna* (custom) of the Prophet, especially during his spiritual and communal leadership in Medina. These movements' attitudes towards sacred texts and traditions finds its expression in an essentialization and a de-historicization of the religious message, as well as a rejection of values or cultural elements with a provenance outside the Qur'an. This is true of innovations issuing from Muslim societies, but especially those originating in the countries of the West. However, at least in the British context, as shown in Birt's chapter, Deobandis are beginning to engage with the non-Muslim public sector (universities, prisons, the army), something still anathema to Wahhabis. The question remains, however, of the political loyalties of the leaders and followers of such religious movements, especially when a very conservative interpretation of Islam is combined with socio-economic marginality. This combination of factors can easily have political consequences, which may in turn lead to radical political activity in the name of Islam.

Islam in Europe: One of the Various Dimensions of Global Islam

As a result of the significance of transnational networks in the education and activities of Muslim communities, any analysis which limits itself to their processes of adaptation within national societies risks presenting only a partial image of the cultural and religious reality of these communities. Islam's adaptation to the democratic context is, rather, a multidimensional process, involving forms of identification both national and transnational.

Furthermore, this evolution is even more complicated in that, since the end of the twentieth century, global Islam has experienced a profound and oftentimes chaotic metamorphosis, marked especially by the crisis of authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world and the rise of a theology of intolerance and a discourse of hate. The Muslim communities of Europe are, thus, just so many echo chambers of this crisis. Their position at the centre of Western civilization crystallizes the debates and upheavals of the entire Muslim world, including the crisis of religious authority, the question of democracy, relationships with 'the Other', the status of women and the appeal of 'fundamentalisms'.

The real challenge for the coming decades is in the continuing evolution of the tension between the two extremes of Islam – one, reformist and open to influence, the other, radical and closed in on itself – which continue to polarize the Muslim communities of the West. The evolution of this tension will be determined both by Muslims themselves, and by the various policies of Western governments on the integration and institutionalization of Islam.

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Section I

Secularity in Europe and the
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