

Islam in Europe: The Challenges of Institutionalization

by Fiona Adamson

European states and Muslim communities alike are facing questions regarding how and to what extent Muslim institutions, identities, and practices should be incorporated into the fabric of European social and political life. One issue at the heart of this debate concerns the institutionalization of Islam in Europe: what are the possibilities for European states and Muslim communities to work together to foster the development of a so-called European Islam? What are the challenges that states and Muslim publics encounter in this process, and what are the possible avenues by which Muslim identities, voices, and practices can be more fully represented in public debates and political discourse in Europe?

This essay attempts to address these questions by focusing on the history of the emergence of “Muslim” as a political category in Europe and by examining changing discourses surrounding the political mobilization and incorporation of immigrant communities across Europe. It then examines efforts by European states to institutionalize Islam in Europe. Institutionalization largely refers to the establishment of official bodies of representation for Islam in European states. But the “institutionalization of Islam in Europe” is also taking other forms, ranging from the establishment of strong non-governmental organizations that contribute to the development of European civil societies, to the emergence of parallel social and political structures that foster separate and autonomous Muslim public spheres within Europe, to organizational structures that are explicitly transnational in their makeup and political aims. All of these developments provide the basis for the emergence of an interdisciplinary research agenda on the future of Islam in Europe.

“Muslim” as a New Political Category in Europe

Neither Islam nor Muslim populations are new features of social and political life in Western Europe. The current population of approximately 13 million Muslims in Europe can be traced back to the history of migration to the continent since the end of World War II. Since the 1950s, migration flows have reshaped the demographics of European states, increasing the number of Muslims living in Europe. First, European decolonization spurred a wave of migration from a variety of Muslim locales, bringing an influx of migrants from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to France; from Pakistan to Great Britain; and from Indonesia to the Netherlands. Second, labor migration to Europe during the 1960s and 1970s — which was facilitated by bilateral agreements between Western European states, such as Germany and France, and Mediterranean states, such as Turkey and Algeria — brought an additional influx of economic migrants from a number of predominantly Muslim states. In Western European states, economic migrants were at that time thought of as constituting a temporary pool of laborers who would eventually return to their country of origin, as evidenced in Germany by the use of the term *Gastarbeiter* (Guestworkers) to identify Turkish and other immigrants in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

The arrival of refugees, political exiles, and asylum seekers from predominantly Muslim countries also served to increase the Muslim population in Europe. Kurdish and Bosnian refugees flowed into Germany in the 1990s; Algerians displaced by civil war in the 1990s migrated to Western Europe; and political exiles from the Arab world have long considered Britain a prime destination. Other types of migrants

that have contributed to the growing European Muslim population include students, businesspeople, and highly skilled workers. The contemporary Muslim population of Europe also includes a number of European converts to Islam and, outside of Western Europe, indigenous Muslim populations in European states such as Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.

While neither Islam nor Muslim communities are new to Europe, what is increasingly new is the salience of “Muslim” as a political category. During the 1960s, 1970s, and even into the 1980s, Islam was treated primarily as a set of religious practices and beliefs that were often viewed, either implicitly or explicitly, as inhibiting the integration of immigrants into Western European societies. Interestingly, though, the category of “Muslim” did not acquire a high level of resonance as a way of describing the immigrant population in Western Europe until the 1980s and 1990s. From the 1960s to 1980s, immigrant populations were variously referred to as guestworkers, foreigners, immigrants, or ethnic and racial minorities. National identities largely trumped religious identities as markers of difference in European societies, lumping together Turkish, Algerian, Pakistani, Tunisian, and Palestinian immigrants to Western Europe with non-Muslim Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Cypriot, or Indian immigrants.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this practice began to change as “Islam” gained more significance as an identity category and boundary marker in European societies. Some argue that this was due largely to global geopolitical developments, such as the Iranian revolution, the Gulf War, and the Palestinian intifada (Buijs and Rath 2002). Others have argued that this has been a consequence of cultural incorporation regimes in many European states. Aristide R. Zolberg and Long Litt Woon (1999), for example, have pointed out that debates surrounding immigration in the United States in the 1990s focused largely on the role of language (i.e., Spanish) as a boundary marker, whereas debates surrounding cultural incorporation in Europe focused on religion (i.e., Islam).

The salience of religion as a boundary marker can be explained partly by examining the historical trajectories of Western European states, which have left institutional legacies for how state and church interact. Although the population of Europe is overwhelmingly secular compared with that of the United States, Europe has closer historical ties between the state and particular religious communities and traditions. Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands all have consociational forms of representation for national religious communities and offer religious education in public schools; Italy and Spain have traditionally had close ties with the Catholic Church; and England and Scotland have established national churches. Within this context, some have argued, Islam achieves more significance as a boundary marker and identity category in Europe than it does in the United States (Zolberg and Woon 1999).

The vast majority of Muslims in Europe still treat Islam primarily as a component of their identity that structures their religious beliefs and practices, just as their predecessors did during the first wave of immigration to Europe in the 1960s. Less common, but increasingly prevalent, is the emergence of “Muslim” as a politically salient identity marker for second- and third-generation Muslims in Europe: it has emerged as an identity around which political mobilization can take place within Muslim communities, and as a discourse that is increasingly structuring debates surrounding immigrant incorporation. There has been a marked shift from immigrant political mobilization around ethnic and

national categories, and left/right cleavages, to an increasing level of mobilization around the political category of “Muslim.”

One result of this shift is that second- and third-generation Muslims are mobilizing in new ways to place issues on the domestic political agendas of Western European states. Such issues include the marginalization of Muslim communities in Europe, critiques of the foreign policy stances of Western European states, and, in some cases, critiques of societal organizing principles such as secularism or republicanism. The category of “Muslim” has emerged as a way of framing political demands and as a means for connecting the condition and experiences of Muslims in Europe to a broader geopolitical context. This process has worked especially well in the post-9/11 setting, which has brought about new anti-terrorism legislation in Europe that has disproportionately affected Muslim communities.

The use of “Muslim” as a political category provides the opportunity for Muslim political entrepreneurs in Europe to make stronger symbolic links between Muslims in Europe and Muslims around the world — thus creating a direct link between the situations of Muslims in Europe, Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Uzbekistan, and so forth. Some political groups in Europe use this framing technique for pursuing a broader agenda shaped by more radical versions of political Islam. Groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir in the United Kingdom direct most of their activities and message at young second- and third-generation Muslims. These groups seek to recruit supporters to their movement by urging young Muslims to “own their own political destiny” by helping to create a global ummah, or community, and by working to build “a support base in the West for the return of the Khilafah state.” Popular support for such radical groups is relatively limited within Muslim populations in Europe. Nevertheless, these groups have been quite effective in stirring up political debate within second- and third-generation Muslims, in part because they provide a framework and an ideology that attempts to explain and place within a broader geopolitical context the sources of the marginalization that some young Muslims feel in Europe. (Mandaville 2001, 128–130).

Institutionalizing Islam in Europe

All of these developments raise questions about how best to incorporate Muslim practices, identities, and discourses into Western European societies. In particular, should Islam in Europe be treated primarily as a religion that exists on a par with other religious and confessional groupings in Western Europe? The attempt by some European states to institutionalize Islam as a recognized religious community is based on this premise. The approach is a relatively new development that has arisen from concerns by European states that Muslim communities in Europe have been too heavily influenced by external actors, and that imams from overseas have not been properly equipped to cater to Muslim populations residing in Europe. It also represents a departure from the practices of European states in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in which it was accepted that Muslim institutions in Europe would either function independently or be administered by imams from migration-sending states, many of whom were official employees of the sending states.

The diversity of organizations and associations within Islam raises an important question: which actors within Muslim communities are the appropriate official interlocutors for “Islam” within European

states? In France alone there were approximately 1,600 different Muslim associations and mosques operating in the country during the late 1990s, creating quite a challenge for French policymakers (Laurence 2005). Another question that has arisen within Muslim communities themselves is whether it is appropriate for European states to demand that Muslim imams and religious leaders be trained within Europe. Some European states are beginning to insist upon this policy, though there are certainly segments of Muslim communities that view this as unnecessary interference of the state in their religious practices.

France has had some limited successes in institutionalizing Islam over the past few years. The French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM), which was established between 2002 and 2003, ensures that Islam has an official status similar to Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism in France (Laurence 2005). Germany has not gone as far, though it has taken some initial steps to try to offer religious instruction in Islam in some school districts. But these attempts to officially institutionalize Islam do not necessarily address some of the broader questions surrounding the use of “Muslim” as an identity marker and/or as a political category in European societies. While some members of Muslim communities are pushing for a greater political role for Islam in European society, and are working for the emergence of a “European Islam,” a minority of Muslim groups, including some of the Salafi organizations, are encouraging Muslims to withdraw from social and political life in Europe (Ramadan 2003, Kepel 2004).

Similar debates have emerged even in European states that have not attempted to officially “institutionalize” Islam. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), which was set up in 1997 by the collective effort of more than 250 Muslim organizations, has acted as the “official voice” of the Muslim community within the U.K. But a number of minority voices within Muslim communities in the U.K. do not feel represented by the MCB; some engage openly in political activities, while others shun participation in mainstream British politics. This situation raises the issue of other ways in which the institutionalization of Islam in Western Europe is occurring within spaces outside and beyond the state. Some forms resemble new social movements, in that they are carving out spaces within civil society to promote a particular form of identity, and in so doing they operate relatively autonomously from the state. Still other spaces, such as the virtual space of the Internet, provide settings for the institutionalization and development of quasi-autonomous “Muslim public spheres” that have resulted in unprecedented levels of interaction and debate over such matters as what it means to live as a Muslim in contemporary European society (Mandaville 2001).

European Studies and Islam in Europe

These developments provide a rich array of possibilities for researchers across disciplinary boundaries to investigate the role of Islam in contemporary European social and political life. The need to do so is especially great, given developments in Europe such as the Madrid bombings, the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, and the bombings in London. These events, combined with the broader geopolitical context that has emerged since 9/11, have increased levels of public debate regarding the future of Islam in Europe. This debate is occurring both within Muslim communities in Europe and within the broader European public. Such dialogue is also sure to stimulate increased research on these issues among scholars of Europe and will require, by its very nature, greater

collaboration among scholars across disciplines to develop a research agenda on Islam in Europe that is truly interdisciplinary.

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Notes:

A Khilafah state refers to a new Caliphate based on Islamic law that would eventually unite Muslims around the globe. These quotes came from the Hizb ut-Tahrir website in the United Kingdom, www.1924.org (accessed July 9, 2005).

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