

Islam or Euro-Islam in Europe?

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Abstract: This study's objective is to examine the current debate on the presence of Islam in Europe. The German-Syrian scholar, Bassam Tibi's Euro-Islam conception served as a basis for the research who described the peaceful coexistence as a bilateral process that needs cooperation and changes from both European and Muslim side. Identity theories of Volkan and Schöpflin also supported the results, giving a deeper understanding on group cohesion. As an essential part of the issue, the complexity of Islam is also discussed, claiming that in the policy-making process Islam cannot be treated only as a religion, but as a religious-ethnic system, and as a historical and cultural heritage. In finding the proper solutions Muslim organisations are essential, even though some of them still do not work as they are supposed to in promoting pluralism. The study's conclusion indicates that the conception of Euro-Islam is an insightful academic initiative that can have a vital role in further cooperation and in creating Europe's unity. Still, for achieving all of its aims, bigger support is needed from the side of the Muslim community.

Keywords: Islam, Europe, Euro-Islam, Muslim, Islamism, cooperation, identity

Introduction

In this essay I am going to give an outline of the current debate on the presence of Islam in Europe. The core concept of my essay is Euro-Islam as introduced by the Syrian-German scholar Bassam Tibi in 1992. (Tibi, 1992, *Les Conditions d'Euro-Islam*) Tibi describes Euro-Islam as a bilateral process, in which Europeans as well as Muslims need to change in order to achieve a more peaceful coexistence. Along with Tibi's proposal I am basing my analysis on the assumption that multiculturalism as a state doctrine is less preferable to integration

theories, which are not equivalent to assimilation.¹ Identity theories (Volkan, Schöpflin) will provide me with an understanding of group cohesion among Muslims in Europe. Nevertheless, I also argue that Muslims are not a homogenous group and therefore, a dialogue with Muslims as a whole is not possible. Finally, I am going to assess the effectiveness of Turkish/Muslim organizations in promoting the integration of the Muslim population.

Islam is more than a religion

Before going into details about Tibi's concept, my first point is to underline the significance of Islamic tradition which has its valuable impact around the world. With this I emphasize that Islam generally, cannot only be dealt with only as a religion. Islam is a *religious-ethical system*, a *historical heritage* "that provides its followers with a transnational religious and national cultural identity" (Sachedina, 2001, p.15) and a *civilization*. The historical and cultural heritage of Islamic civilization and teachings are unfortunately undervalued and confused with Islamism. Therefore, efforts should be made in order to emphasize the distinction between this heritage and a minority within. By political Islam or Islamism I mean the following: "Islamism implies support for an Islamic state." (...) "Some Muslim fundamentalist groups have explicit political aims, and seek to use the electoral process to gain an "Islamic" government." (Ali, 2008, p.41) I assume in this essay that negating the existence of Islamists in Europe can do harm to the Muslim population as well, because their approach is not compatible with Europe and its values, thereby hindering their integration. This becomes reality in terms of Islamic education, in which young Muslims can be educated in the "wrong way" about their religion, in case an Islamist group takes over their religious education.

My next point is that given the fact that Islam "provides its followers with a transnational, religious and cultural identity", as cited above, it can result in very different concepts around the world. The differences emerging from different cultural backgrounds cannot be negated either but the conflictive elements should be dealt with and transformed. What do we mean

¹ Multiculturalism emphasizes on the differences, rather than focusing on the similarities between different groups of society. Tibi urges for the recognition that multiculturalism is not equal to cultural pluralism. He criticizes the cultural relativist positions because highlighting differences instead of similarities would end up in creating "ghettos", also referred to as parallel societies. Cultural relativism negates common values and contradicts cultural pluralism. The European society ought not to negate its own culture, which does not exclusively consist of genocide, racism and dominance. According to him, multiculturalism is about transforming the ancient universalism to cultural relativism. He describes these positions as "philo-Islamism", as opposed to "anti-Islamism", where he concludes that there should be a middle way. (Tibi, 2003, pp.74–75)

when we say Muslims? As Roy writes, I assume that it is complicated to talk about ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ as cohesive entities, given their inner diversity.

Who do we call Muslim? A mosque-goer, the child of Muslim parents, somebody with a specific ethnic background (an Arab, a Pakistani), or one who shares with another a specific culture? What is Islam? A set of beliefs based on a revealed book, a culture linked to historical civilization? A set of norms and values that can be adapted to different cultures? An inherited legacy based on a common origin? (Roy, 2004, p.21)

What happens when it is taken out of the original context, “the Muslim world”? Even the terms “Islam and the West” or “Islam in the West” has been subjects of profound discussions. As Amir Hussain suggests, it is preferable to use the phrase “Islam in the West”. Ten years ago, however, Kelsay still suggested that “Muslim immigration is growing to such an extent that soon we cannot speak about Islam and the West, but Islam in the West.” (Kelsay, 1993) Nowadays there is quite a strong consensus on the usage of the term “Islam in the West”. First of all, the expression acknowledges the reality of Muslims living in the West and who are in many cases already European citizens. He warns from using the term “Islam and the West” due to the interconnectedness of the two, historically as well as in terms of religious connections. He also mentions the philosophical, literary impact of Muslim scholars on the “Western world”. Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), among others were read by and had an influence on European philosophers. Many education fields, such as mathematics or medicine have gained from the contribution of Muslim scientists. (Hussain, 2007, pp.139–140)

With the idea of interconnectedness and mutual influence in mind, which can be perceived as basic tools when regulating conflicts, I will move on to the connection between Islam and European values, such as Western democracy and secularization. In today’s controversial news coverage, the former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s words should be followed. “Speak out against militant extremism or share the world’s misunderstanding of Islam.” (Tibi, 2008, p.xv) In this essay I try to make my contribution and to demonstrate that Islam is truly “salaam”, meaning peace.

Euro Islam

Particularities in Islam

In this section I will stress on some of the major particularities in Islamic tradition and legal custom compared to European legal tradition. The first particularity is the absence of a central church. As Harris rightly puts it,

Islam is not concerned with distinction between “church” and “state”. There is scarcely any such entity as an Islamic church, and an Islamic state has always been a controversial institution. (Harris, 2007, p.108)

The fact that secularization in the Western sense does not exist in Islam, has been categorized as problematic and one of the major concerns that faces Muslim communities in Europe. Sachedina at the same time seems to embrace an opposite opinion as the one of the supporters of Euro-Islam, when he adds:

“The secular culture tends toward a negative characterization of anything religious as soon as it crosses the boundary from the private to the public sphere. The religious culture, on the contrary, holds that religious values are a valuable resource in combating social and political injustices.” (Sachedina, 2001, p.3)

In this sense, “Islamic societies”, in which religious obligation is a key element can manage social problems and sustain a sense of community. Even though it sounds controversial from a Western perspective, it can provide a just society due to the ethical orientations. Here comes the question again, if this can “be outsourced” to a secular political culture and if it may be problematic, for example regarding the freedom of religion. With other words, even though some scholars defend the idea of Islam and state connection as a natural way of providing social policies, the idea of Islam and state cannot work in Europe. Historically, Muslim societies, in their original historical journey developed their own kind of structures *on the basis of the main Islamic sources*. – as Pacaci adds it. (Pacaci, 2013, p.368) But as we discussed in class, every culture has the potential for peace, its own tradition and finding it can be a mission. Islam is a wonderful example. Islam undoubtedly has the potential for democratic pluralism:

“Islamic revelation presents a theology that resonates with the modern pluralistic belief that other faiths are not merely inferior manifestation of religiosity, but variant forms of

individual and communal responses to the presence of the transcendent in human life.”

(Sachedina, 2001, p.14)

The tradition of pluralism is there, the one with which the individual as part of the collective can identify. Therefore, it is important to state that Islam is not an exclusivist religion originally. The concept of *dhimmi* in Muslim society means “religious minority”. In the early history of Islam, *dhimmi* status was provided for those of different religions. Although non-Muslims had to pay the *jyza*, the poll tax but “*dhimmis* owned and cultivated fields and vineyards next to Muslims’ lands as well as their living side by side. Muslims and *dhimmis* lived in the same neighbourhood and there was no isolation from one another and no ghettos in 17th–century Kayseri.” (Pacaci, 2013, p.368)

The power of ijihad as opposed to taqlid

The Interpretation of Islamic sources in Islamic jurisprudence is a key factor. This is an important tool for believers to perceive their reality with the help of Quranic teaching. In Islamic tradition the word “*al-ijihad*” refers to a traditionally pluralistic “culture of argument” which is based on personal interpretation of the Islamic legal sources. It gives space for further reconsideration of Quranic teachings, therefore making a way of building a bridge between current world affairs and traditional interpretations. Its aim is to “make religion more relevant to the modern generation”. (Ali, 2008, p.111) Such independent reasoning needs to be embraced given the contemporary social and political contexts. Herein the main objective is to rethink the writings in a way that connects to the communities’ reality more efficiently. It is a possibility of weakening political unity and promoting pluralism. In no way does it seek to destroy already existing traditions. “*Taqlid*” basically means following past interpretations, thereby not giving space for the independent evolution of religion. The initial Islamic message was in many cases combined with local traditions and “misinterpreted”, therefore the original message should be rediscovered by believers. (Ramadan, 2001, 65) Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood provides an antipluralistic way of interpreting the Koran, which is not the right way. (Sachedina, 2001, p.40) Therefore, jurists and Quranic interpreters or imams speaking to European Muslims, should share the idea of *ijihad*.

Germany and Islam

In the past few decades Germany has experienced a significant amount of immigration that the country had not seen before 1960. As Max Frisch a Swiss writer puts it “We asked for work force and human beings came.” –, referring to the controversy that defined German policy towards immigration. Given the fact that immigration was a considerably new phenomenon, Germany realized too late that it had become a country of immigration, which needed a new perception and new strategies from policymakers, the population itself, “immigrants” and “*Einheimische*”² in order to achieve a peaceful society. The overwhelming majority of “immigrants”³ have been Muslims. Although the importance of religion in public life depends on the country of origin of Muslim, it is a significant factor in every country of the Muslim world. As Sachedina puts it, “in the Muslim world, where religion permeates the national culture, Islamic tradition maintains an active interest in issues of national politics and social justice.” (Sachedina, 2001, p.4) This is the reason why religion has also become part of the debate. Among the religious communities the Islamic has become the second largest community. (Sen, 2002, 7) Although at this point I have to stress out that it is quite inaccurate to refer to Muslims as a homogenous religious group due to their inner diversity. Even though believers are part of the *ummah*, which is the community of people of Islamic faith, internally they are fragmented ethnically, culturally. (Moxon-Brown, 2004, p.139) They are culturally diverse groups who share a religious idea.

It was Tibi’s concept that proposed an “*aurea mediocritas*” while providing a golden middle way for changing attitudes in German society from both sides. His first assumption is that Europe and the Muslims world are two different civilizations, which had hostility and friendship as well, but the negation of problems arising from the two does not solve any problems. According to his opinion the integration of Muslims into German society is a bilateral process, in which Europeans have to give up their idea of ethnic thinking, whereas Muslims need to embrace democratic, secular values. (Tibi, 2008, p.xiii.)

According to Tibi we have to overcome the Islamophobia present in the West but the demonization of the West that some people practice is not the solution. He criticizes the cultural relativist voices which he considers can lead to victimization, reproaches and self-negation. A possible answer can be the des-ethnicisation of Europe and Euro-Islam for it is as

² “*Einheimische*” is a German expression for “native population”, mostly referring to ethnically Germans.

³ The word “immigrant” is not correct in many cases because nowadays the third generation of past “*Gastarbeiter*” has grown up Germany, meaning that they ought not to be dealt with as immigrants any more. The denomination of people with “foreign” parents is mostly “Germans with immigration background”.

wrong to see the essence of Europe as rooted in racism, genocide as it is with dealing with Islam from a phobic position. Due to the lack of spokesmen of the communities, those people who speak in their names are not coming from the immigrant world and therefore disown their necessities. In many cases imams educating young Muslims are attached to political Islamic organizations. To avoid it, if Afroislam or Indoislam can exist, why would Euro-Islam not be a solution to arising problems? Da'wa, hijra and shari'a has to be given up by Muslims.

He proposes the emphasis on a liberal variety of Islam which can be accepted by Muslims and Europeans as well. (Tibi, 2002, pp.76–79) It would be an Islamic religion adapted to the culture of modernity. Meer argues as well, that Muslims in Europe, in spite of coming from different cultures, share a collective sense of self, evidenced by empirically observable Muslim identities at local, national and supra-national level. (Meer, 2012, p.179) He adds that there are three positions in which “Muslims” are interpreted. According to the first one Europe’s Muslims are redefining Islam as European Muslims, this is the option that Tibi is proposing. Herein they consider Europe as their home but their lives are guided by Islamic principles. The second interpretation fears that due to demographic, cultural and political weakness of Europe, “pre-modern Islam will beat post-modern Christianity” (Steyn, 2006b). The third one supposes that accommodating Muslims will be more difficult because Islam refuses to be privatized and “advances into the public realm of politics in collective and exceptional ways.” (Meer, 2012, p.180) Independent from any position, it has to be underlined that young Muslims cannot be considered as temporal citizens any more. They ought to be considered as equal citizens with Muslim faith, where the “ius sanguinis” way of thinking is manifested.

Euro-Islamic asabiyya? Muslim identity?

The presupposition about identities is that they are not static, thereby capable of movement. As Schöpflin suggests, each and every group of the society should have a voice, a space for expression. The recognition of the moral value of each entity is essential. Once they are constructed, and there are attempts to change it, an intensified protective mechanism will emerge. (Schöpflin, 2004, pp45–46) The aforementioned “collective sense of self” is understandable when we see that collective identity, such as being a Muslim means a sense of security that gives significance to the world. (Schöpflin, 2004, p.35)

According to Tibi, the emergence of a „European asabiyya” is needed. Asabiyya is the expression of belonging to the homeland. Originally it is an Arabic expression deriving from the time before Islam. It suggests a common identity. It is desirable among Europeans Muslims who develop a sense of “European togetherness”. He assumes that Muslims, although culturally diverse, share a “civilisational unity”. (Tibi, 2000, p.131) The core of the problem is that Islam has a universal world view and „the West” too. This is why one of them has to leave the idea of the universal thinking, this is why Euro-Islam is needed to be further developed. One tool can be education. According to the German constitution, „religious education is regular curriculum (...) the religious education is based on the core principles of the religious community.” (German Constitution, 7; 3) This is becoming complicated when there is no unified religious community. In this case who will determine the material of the education?

Sen and Ramadan emphasize that those who confess Islam as their religion but never attends public prayers should be taken into account when analysing. They call these believers “cultural Muslim”. (Ramadan, 2001, p.143; Sen, p.43.)

Muslim organizations as promoters of pluralism?

Germany has made efforts to ensure that all groups have a voice in society, in an organizational level. Milli Görüş or DITIB are organizations, which are aimed to foster the integration of Muslim immigrant, German citizens with Turkish backgrounds. DITIB can be criticized primarily because it is a branch of the Turkish state that runs all public religious affairs. The organization is directly linked to the Turkish Prime Ministry. A religious attaché is appointed to the organization coming from Turkey and imams are sent to Germany and funded by the Turkish state. One of the imams summed up the problem as “they are foreigners here (and in Turkey)”. (Yükeleyen and Yuldakur, 2011, p.70)

The German Supreme Court gave the possibility of determining the material of the Islamic religious education to an organization called Islamic Federation. Member of the Federation is Milli Görüş as well, which seeks political Islam in its rhetoric. In Nordrhein-Westphalia land they planned public Islamic education throughout the Land. The different Islamic wings argued about choosing inappropriate members in the Coordination Committee who now have the power to choose what students will learn. They criticized them for being undemocratic.

Finally, the concept of Euro-Islam is a good and insightful academic initiative and since its emergence, many scholars dealt with it and continued with further research. This is the reason why I believe that it is a meaningful step towards overcoming problems. At the same time the public support from the side of the Muslim population is considerably low. In an article of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Muslims still believe that “Muslim education should remain in the hands the Muslim population (Preuß, 2010). The intervention of the German state would mean an attack for their cultural identity.

I share the opinion that the key should be “Those who believe in the unity of humankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of humankind’s religious history”, as Hussain quotes from Wilfred Cantwell Smith. (Hussain, 2007, p.140)

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