The presence of a rather important Muslim population in Western European countries is a consequence of a recent voluntary immigration of workers coming from the Middle East, North Africa or South Asia. Their administrative status and social integration vary considerably from one country to the other (often citizens in France and UK, rarely in Germany). Until recently they kept a low profile. But through upward social mobility or the ‘brain-drain’ from the rest of the Muslim world, a Muslim intelligentsia has slowly emerged in Europe and is now more vocal in calling for a recognition of the Muslim presence, triggering heated debates in European public opinion.

What we have here is the fabrication of a neo-ethnicity. It may work, but has little to do with Islam.

What we have here is the fabrication of a ‘Muslim community’ by retaining the terms used to qualify such groups might be lost (as is colloquial Arabic in France) as well as dress and diet. A process of acculturation is underway, even if it does not lead to integration, but to other patterns of differences. The bear (slang for Arab) culture of the suburbs in France has nothing to do with Islam or even with Arab culture: the slang (verlan) is French, the diet and the clothing are American (Mc Donald’s and the clothing are American (McDonald’s or Belgium). Many Muslims or social workers), Islam is embedded in such pristine cultures (‘Arab,’ ‘Asian’). But these cultures are not transmitted as such from generation to generation. Language might be lost (as is colloquial Arabic in France) as well as dress and diet. A process of acculturation is underway, even if it does not lead to integration, but to other patterns of differences. The bear (slang for Arab) culture of the suburbs in France has nothing to do with Islam or even with Arab culture: the slang (verlan) is French, the diet and the clothing are American (McDonald’s and the clothing are American (McDonald’s or Belgium).

Olivier Roy

What do we call a ‘Muslim’ in Europe? This is a seldom-asked question in response to which there are two approaches: the ethnic one and the purely religious one. The more common approach in Europe is to consider Muslims as a quasi-ethnic group, identifying them with people originating from Muslim countries, as it is the case in Belgium. Many Muslims or social workers), Islam is embedded in such pristine cultures (‘Arab,’ ‘Asian’). But these cultures are not transmitted as such from generation to generation. Language might be lost (as is colloquial Arabic in France) as well as dress and diet. A process of acculturation is underway, even if it does not lead to integration, but to other patterns of differences. The bear (slang for Arab) culture of the suburbs in France has nothing to do with Islam or even with Arab culture: the slang (verlan) is French, the diet and the clothing are American (McDonald’s and the clothing are American (McDonald’s or Belgium).

Islamic identity

Believers who want to maintain a purely Islamic identity are also confronted by the fact that pristine cultures divide the Muslim community in Europe. Mosques tend to be attended in Europe according to common origin, dialect, or by belonging to communities. There are ‘Moroccan’, ‘Algerian’, ‘Punjabi’ and even ‘Kurdish’ mosques. For many second or third generation Muslims, or even for ‘born-again Muslims’ identifying Islam and culture of origin is a mistake for two reasons: it is a dividing factor, but it also tends to embed Islam in cultural traditions which have little to do with ‘true Islam’. The ‘salafist’ approach, which stresses the return to an authentic Islam, rid of local traditions and superstitions, fits well with the contemporay process of acculturation. Its proponents strive to build non-ethnic mosques and communities. To bypass the cultural divisions brought by pristine cultures, they tend to advocate the use of language of the host country (English, French, etc.), which is, by the way, the main if not the sole language understood by the youth, or to push for modern Arabic. In both cases, they go along with the process of acculturation and globalization. In this sense, modern fundamentalism is not a leftover of traditional cultures, but on the contrary, an expression of modernization and globalization. Religion is voided from its cultural content (there is no such thing, for a fundamentalist, as ‘Islamic’ music, or even an Islamic novel). Religion is assimilated to a code of behaviour (‘boys’ and ‘do not’), and not to a culture. In this sense, it can adapt to a world where national cultures are giving way to codes of communication and sub-cultures.

Muslims in Europe: From Ethnic Identity to Religious Recasting

‘Born again Muslims’

A second consequence of the immigration is that there is no longer any social evidence of religion. Of course in neighbourhoods where large Muslim populations are concentrated, there is some social pressure to adopt a conservative way of life (with full of women). But there are no social constraints or even inducements to behave as a good Muslim; praying, fasting, eating halal require personal involvement. One has to re-create, on an individual basis, the patterns of an everyday life for a Muslim. Even if one joins specific communities (with or without a neighbourhood basis), this community is established on the basis of a volunteer and personal engagement. In fact, to be a ‘true’ Muslim is an individual choice, because it usually means a double break with a too traditional familial environment and with the dominant secular society. Here we meet the phenomenon of the ‘born again Muslim’, who after a very mundane and sometimes dissolute life (e.g. womanizing, alcohol, drugs) goes back to Islam, after a spiritual experience, on patterns very similar to many ‘born again Christians’; the emphasis is here on personal conversion, redeeming and expression of self, not on community and social conformity. The terms ‘faith’, ‘salvation’, that is the quest for identity and psychological balance, are more important than ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’. Stories of conversions underline this quest for equilibrium and happiness. Fundamentalism, even in its stress on the communitarian nature of Islam, goes also along the individualization of social life, common to the western societies. This lack of evidence can also been seen in the problem of authority. Who is entitled to teach Islam? The famous institutions of the Muslim world, like the University of Al Akzar, in Cairo, retain some prestige but are unable to meet the religious needs of the Muslim in Europe: training of modern imams, adaptation of the curriculum of studies, etc. But the problem is not so much a lack of trained ulama in fact the vacuum is filled by self-proclaimed thinkers, who, whatever their intellectual background, claim that they know and can teach ‘true Islam’. The web is full of sites emanating from individuals or small communities, which share two patterns: a high level of fragmentation and the stress on
true Islam. In a word, the modern commu-
nity is virtual, and not embedded in a society
or a territory. This individual re-appropria-
tion of knowledge and authority is also an
indicator of the westernization of the rela-
tion to religion.

Of course, the ‘salafi’ or fundamentalist an-
swer to westernization and globalization is
not the only answer, even if it is the more vis-
ible. In fact most of the Muslims who would
define themselves as ‘believers’ tend to find
their own personal way of adapting to this
western environment, which by the way is
not a ‘Christian’ one, but a secular one. There
is no symmetry between religions, because
the western religions have left the public
scene to become private. The process we are
witnessing today is one of individualization
and privatization of religious practices, of
the relation of the self with religion.

Here we come to another issue. It is wide-
ly admitted, among western public opinion,
that westernization should go along with an
aggiornamento in theology and religious
thinking, a ‘liberal Islam’ as opposed to fun-
damentalist Islam. Of course there are many
Islamic thinkers working on this issue. But
their impact on the Muslim population
seems rather weak. Any visit to an Islamic
bookshop shows that the most popular
books are not related to an ‘enlightened’
perception of Islam, but to basic or even
fundamentalist description of what religion
is and what the duties of the believer are.
But this is not in contradiction with the
‘salafi’ trends within the Muslim popula-
tions. In fact, the two real trends which are
working among the European Muslims are:
firstly, a vocal fundamentalist school of
thought, trying to build a reconstructed
community by preaching individuals, and
addressing the real concerns of individuals
who lost most of their community links; and
secondly, the silent majority of the believ-
ers, who found their way on the basis of
compromises, adaptations, and makeshift
theology. The real processes at work among
the Muslim are that of individualization and
reconstruction of identities along different
patterns, all phenomena that undermine
the very idea of ‘one’ Muslim community in
Europe. There is no Western Islam, there are
Western Muslims.

Notes
1. The confusion between religious and ‘ethnic’
groups, or more exactly the perception of a
religious group as a quasi one has some
antecedents in Europe: one can be an atheist
‘Protestant’ or ‘Catholic’ in Northern Ireland.
2. ‘La communauté virtuelle l’Internet et la

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