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Public institutions and Islam

A New Stigmatization?

LAURENT BONNEFOY

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 inspired a long series of critical studies on the representation of Islam and Muslims in 'Western' media and politics. These studies, of varying quality and interest, focused on the way dominant discourses essentialize and stigmatize Islam and the Muslim World. It was to be expected that mainstream reactions in North America and Europe to the September 11th terrorist attacks would constitute an elaboration on those types of depictions. And indeed many popular books, articles and editorials published after 9/11 have insisted on the allegedly intrinsic links between terrorism and Islam. While true that Islamophobia is not new and that it has been transmitted by various media, experts, and political parties and organizations,¹ it appears that, at least in Europe, 9/11 and its aftermath have given rise to much more complex and ambiguous reactions than were initially apparent.

For reasons having mainly to do with the proliferation of anti-discrimination norms and regulations, as well as the growing demographic weight of Muslim citizens, the ministers, members of parliament, and judges in France and Great Britain did not portray Islam or the Muslim community as being responsible for the terrorist attacks of 9/11. A few days after 9/11, Tony Blair stated that, 'Blaming Islam is as ludicrous as blaming Christianity for loyalist attacks on Catholics or nationalist attacks on Protestants in Northern Ireland.'² Lionel Jospin, the then French Prime Minister, similarly asserted that, 'It must be clear that this fight against terrorism is waged neither on Islam nor on Arab or Muslim countries.'³ These sorts of statements underscore a specific feature of post-9/11 reactions from public institutions, most notably in both Great Britain and France, which can be called the selective stigmatization of Islam and Muslims.

As Mahmood Mamdani⁴ and Jocelyne Cesari⁵ observed, the 9/11 attacks created conditions that required a distinction within dominant discourses between what is considered 'good' and 'bad' Islam. Obviously, this type of stigmatization is not new, and therefore 9/11 cannot be considered a total point of rupture with the past. The attempts to explain the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the actions of the Hizbollah in Lebanon, by attributing these to the supposedly divergent nature of the Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, already expressed a similar stigmatizing conception. Yet, with the attacks in New York and Washington, this stigmatization has become much more significant and has been quite systematically used by French and British public bodies to legitimize certain government-adopted policies.

Modalities of stigmatization

The selective stigmatization of Islam and Muslims is based on certain, usually implicit, characteristics that appear in the dominant social discourses. First of all, so-called 'good' Islam (as opposed to 'bad' Islam) is seen as moderate and must therefore explicitly and continuously condemn 'political Islam', stick to dominant views on international and local issues and be vigorously opposed to all forms of terrorism.

The current conservative French government makes just such a distinction between 'bad Islam' and the preferred 'openly visible Islam' ('l'Islam au grand jour'), which is strictly opposed to the 'Islam of the caves

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 Islam has become increasingly associated with intolerance and violence in public debates in Europe. However, in the aftermath of 9/11 'good' images of Islam have also been highlighted in opposition to 'bad' Islam. Governments and political parties in various European countries, including France and the UK, along with the stigmatization and criminalization of 'bad' Islam, have contributed to the elaboration of this more 'positive' imagery. The differences between French and British approaches in this process of 'othering' towards Islam are much less real than they are often believed to be.

and garages', and which is supposed to express its attachment to the 'founding values of the Republic' and, for instance, support the ban of the Islamic scarf in state schools and condemn 'communitarianism'. This distinction, used at all levels of French public institutions, becomes a quasi-scientific category that is employed by political leaders, exploited in the media, and that structures mainstream perceptions. It should be noted that the 'moderation' of so-called 'good' Islam is not characterized in entirely the same way in France and Great Britain. Dominant discourses and perceptions on questions regarding the place of religious or secular communities are not held in common. These oppositions and differences in perceptions and founding myths (Republic vs. Multiculturalism) do not however mean, as often thought by mainstream analysis, that France and Great Britain embody contradictory models on the matter of relations with the Muslim 'other'.

Significantly, 'good' Islam is portrayed to be authentic, the one and only 'true' Islam. Simultaneously, 'bad' Islam is not only deemed 'bad' because it promotes social or political practices that are viewed as harmful, but also because it is supposedly wrong at the theological level and thereby opposed to the 'true' teachings of the Qur'an. Public institutions have thus granted themselves the right to determine the authentic nature of Islam. These public institutions do not escape the essentialist approach that considers this religion to exist independently of its followers' divergent social practices.

And while 'good' Islam is 'integrated into the national community', 'bad' Islam is seen as essentially foreign, imported through 'transnational networks', connected with 'international terrorism' and thus not possibly 'French' or 'British'. Nicolas Sarkozy, French Minister of the Interior, once asserted, 'We know that in the garages, in the caves of certain suburbs, hateful and intolerant discourses are still being held in the name of Islam. This Islam of disparity should not be [that of the Muslims of France] since it does not have its place in France.'⁶ 'Bad' Muslims thus represent an enemy from within that is directly connected to the international sphere, and to situations of conflict in the Muslim world. In December 2002, the French police arrested members of a so-called 'Chechen network', which was considered to be linked to just such international terrorism. This linkage, highlighted by the official discourse, is meant to de-legitimize non-conforming Islam. Imams in particular, are stigmatized and believed to be the main agents of the process of foreign importation. As Sarkozy put it in an interview, 'It is important that the Republic dialogues with Muslims. It is an issue of appeasement. What I want is precisely an appeased and moderate Islam. I would add that this mutual recognition also gives us more ability to fight the few imams that transgress the law and preach violence and anti-Semitism. These should be expelled.'⁷ Notably, Sarkozy refers only to 'foreign' imams, those who can be expelled, as the only ones who preach violence.

Significantly, all the social practices that are considered negative by dominant views are believed to be imported and are said to have nothing to do with local political and social issues. In the framework of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act (ATCSA), voted into existence by the British Parliament in November 2001, suspects are explicitly con-



French Minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozy (at right) with representatives of two French mosques

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nected to the outside; thus some sections of this act that concern the deportation and detention of so-called 'suspected international terrorists' (Sections 22 and 23) and exclude any protection under the refugee convention (Sections 33 and 34), apply to foreigners only. The case of Abu Hamza al-Misri, former preacher of the Finsbury Park mosque, reveals the resolve to externalize the so-called 'bad' Muslim. Those, like Labour MP Andrew Dismore who support the act, directly applied section 4 of the new Asylum, Immigration and Nationality Act that came into force in April 2003 to Abu Hamza. This act enables the state to revoke the British citizenship of immigrants who are considered to 'seriously prejudice the United Kingdom's interests.' The revoking of Abu Hamza's British nationality and, as a result, his possible deportation, permitted the government to stress even more his supposed foreignness.

Materializing the distinction

Ever since 9/11 governments in both Britain and France have shown themselves to be keen on 'integrating' those considered 'good' Muslims; that is, to institutionalize the relations with the so-called 'good' faction of Islam. The 9/11 events were conveniently used as an opportunity to intensify the relations between the British Labour government and certain Muslim organizations, particularly the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). In France, the victory of the conservative government in June 2002 led to an acceleration of the process of the formation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM).⁸ The creation of this top-down structured council, basically controlled by the Ministry of the Interior and first initiated (under a different name, and with different methods and organizations) in the beginning of the 1990s, is believed to be an answer to 9/11.

In France, the new debates on laïcité, and the specific law that could be adopted to ban the Islamic scarf from state schools, have surfaced as the direct responses of different groups to the recognition of 'good' Islam as promoted by the CFCM and the levels of government involved in its creation. David Blunkett, Home Office Secretary and author of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill, passed in 2002, underscores the growing need for a critical reevaluation of the concept of multiculturalism and the assertion of specific values concerning the 'integration' of 'immigrants'. The institutional determination to include or, to use the more common vocabulary of the Republic, to 'integrate' the 'good' Islamic faction, goes together with the exclusion of what is considered to be the 'bad' one. The struggle against terror and the numerous negative effects of this on the livelihoods of Muslims, are legitimized by the processes of inclusion regarding 'good' Islam, in the form of the CFCM or the MCB or otherwise, in mainstream discourses.

Contrary to Great Britain, France did not formally adopt a state of exception after 9/11, yet the Labour government did add temporary amendments granting police special powers to the 'Law on Everyday Security', which were unconstitutionally implemented by Parliament in November 2001. The reinforcement of the 'Plan Vigipirate' (applied in instances of high terrorist threat) took place immediately after 9/11. Its stipulations also grant temporary powers to the police and judiciary in order to wage war against terrorists. The articles in the 'Law on Everyday Security' connected to the new 'global threat', amongst many other things, facilitate deportations from French territory and allow for pre-emptive action against suspected terrorists.⁹ The Ministry of the Interior is now able to justify the arrests of Muslim individuals by simply stating, 'The coming days will allow us to see if they are involved in serious affairs.'¹⁰

The selective perceptions and portrayals of Islam and Muslims, and the ambiguous language and messages that underlie the practices of public bodies today, are important and possibly lasting characteristics of the relations between the body politic and Muslims in the post-9/11 context in France and Britain, and possibly in other European countries as well. The differences between French and British approaches towards Islam are much less real than they are often believed to be. Post-9/11 has brought with it a consensus on the nature of what constitutes the 'other', thus blurring the French republican and the British multicultural models.

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Notes

1. For the reactions to 9/11 in France see Vincent Geisser, *La nouvelle Islamophobie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), p.122. See also the summary report on *Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001* by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (http://eumc.eu.int/eumc/material/pub/anti-islam/Synthesis-report_en.pdf).
2. Tony Blair article in *The Daily Jang*, 23 September 2001.
3. Speech by Lionel Jospin before Civil Servants, 20 September 2001.
4. Mahmood Mamdani, 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: a Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism' in *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World*, edited by Eric Hershberg and Kevin W. Moore (New York: New Press, 2002), p.44–60.
5. Jocelyne Cesari, 'Islam de l'extérieur, musulman de l'intérieur : Deux visions après le 11 septembre 2001', in *Cultures & Conflits* 44, 2001, p. 97–115.
6. Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy before Muslim representatives, 4 May 2003.
7. Interview with Nicolas Sarkozy in *Le Parisien*, 15 May 2003.
8. See Valérie Amiraux, 'CFCM: A French Touch?', *ISIM Newsletter* 12 (June 2003), p.24–25.
9. See *Immigration, Asylum and Terrorism: A Changing Dynamic in European Law*, edited by Evelien Brouwer, Petra Catz, Elspeth Guild (Nijmegen: Instituut voor Rechtssoevereigniteit, 2003), p. 202.
10. Interview with Nicolas Sarkozy on Europe 1 radio, 8 November 2002