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Muslim Girls in Belgium

Individual Freedom through Religion?

NADIA FADIL

Studies focusing on Muslims in Europe are growing at a rapid pace. While the subject of study is not new, the perspective is. Long considered guest workers in Flanders, the Netherlands and Germany, Muslims in Europe whose children constitute the 'second generation' are now being studied increasingly from a religious, rather than a migrant labor, point of view. In Belgium research on these communities used to be largely policy-oriented and focused on the community's socio-economic problems. The more recent research is more concerned with 'culture', with the newest trend being to focus on Islam and the possible emergence of a specifically 'European Islam'. The collective hypothesis that seems to be forming is that in coming years Islam will adapt to 'new' European structures in a way that will enable Muslims to consider themselves full European citizens. One advantage of this hypothesis is that it frees both scientists and concerned Muslims from having to choose between over-simplified categories of 'segregation' and 'assimilation'. Scholars no longer have to render Muslims exotic, nor do they have to neglect their specificities. 'Muslims' can 'integrate' themselves in this new European context and call themselves 'full members' without necessarily assimilating themselves into the dominant group. Their differentiating identity is religious and thus transnational and neutral, not ethno-national. The consensus that this model offers both parties accounts in part for the growing scholarly attention paid to 'European Islam'.

A secularized Islam?

Various studies about how Muslims live and organize themselves in Western Europe have been carried out under the rubric of 'European Islam'. Yet these studies have remained mainly outside the field of the sociology of religion despite its well-established tradition of interpreting the different tendencies present in religion. If a 'European Islam' is really developing, a necessary question one might ask is how this Islam interacts with the secularized context in which it has been translated?

Secularization is one of the most-commonly used concepts to typify Western Europe and its relation to religion; for many it refers to the end of religion. Yet secularization, as treated in the sociology of religion, relates to the changing relationship of religion in society as modernization takes place. Religion loses influence in spheres such as politics, economics and education and plays a role mainly in ethical and moral aspects of life. As such, secularization implies neither an end to, nor a disappearance of, religion; it simply refers to the transformation of religion in a 'modern' era.

At the level of the individual 'believer', this change becomes manifest through the process of religious individualization: religious practice is no longer the consequence of prescription, but rather of choice. The term 'religious *bricolage*' has been used to emphasize the centrality of individual choice in this construct (Dobbelaere 1999; Hervieu-Léger 1994). Another characteristic of the secularization process is

Research on Muslim communities in Europe has recently shifted focus from labor and social policy concerns to issues of 'religion' and 'culture'. In particular, there has been a growing interest in the possible emergence of a specifically 'European Islam'.

Through examining the religious attitudes and practices of Muslim girls in Belgium, the author investigates the viability of a 'European Islam' and in so doing poses questions about the nature of secularization, free will and individualization of religious practice and belief.

compartmentalization whereby people seek religious answers only for specific fields—mainly moral and ethical issues, while other fields—like politics or economy—are not associated with a religious discourse. Yet do these concepts hold up? Through in-depth interviews with Moroccan girls aged between 16-18 living in Antwerp (Belgium) about their faith and religious engagement, we can test some of the propositions about religious individualization.¹

Religious individualization

Several authors have recently pointed to an active process of individualization in Islam. Babès argues, for instance, that notions of individualization can be found in the Qur'anic distinction between *niyya*, the one with unselfish faith and pure intention, and the *munafiq*, or hypocrite who practices without faith (1997, 2000). According to Babès this distinction indicates that individual faith, the '*Islam du cœur*' as she calls it, is appreciated much more than social Islam: this dimension of faith, she concludes, is far more important to most Muslims than the question of whether 'they may eat with the left hand or if saving money is forbidden' (author's translation, 2000: 189).

Through interviews with Moroccan girls about what they consider 'begin a good Muslim', we can assess normative attitudes. Nora, for instance, describes a good Muslim as someone who 'follows the rules, all the rules and not just those you like.' She explains that praying regularly and fasting during Ramadan is an obligation, not a choice, and says, 'It's not like I choose praying, Ramadan too, but I don't go to Mecca because it's too expensive. It's no travel brochure, is it?!'

Clearly, the description she gives of a good Muslim is not one in which 'individual choice' plays a central role. To her, Islam cannot be a matter of individual choice and she casts a doubt on the very essence of religious *bricolage*. Rather, to be a good Muslim, she believes that one has to be consistent in religious practices and follow the *entire* story. This emphasis on 'orthopraxis' was not only expressed by Nora, but came up repeatedly by other girls who emphasized the importance of following *all* rules and conveyed the belief that Islam should be applied to *all spheres of life*. They seriously call into question the legitimacy of notions of religious *bricolage* or compartmentalization of religion from other aspects of life. When another girl Amina, for example, evaluates her religious practice, she makes a clear distinction between herself and what she calls *real* Muslims: by noting, '...there are only few people who are real Muslims. There are only few who can say about themselves: 'I'm Muslim, Muslim'. I'm Moroccan, I believe in Islam, but I don't really pray to be a real Muslim. They [the real Muslims] live really strictly according to the rules—and that's really difficult—you really need to have a will for it.' Though Amina says she believes in God and the importance of Islam, she clearly does not seem to be satisfied with the way she practices her religion.

This idea of being a bad or inadequate Muslim is also reflected in the words of Iman who describes the sense of guilt she feels about her poor religious commitment. She says, 'I'm not a good Muslim, I'm everything but a good Muslim.' When pressed about why she considers herself a bad Muslim she explains: 'Sometimes I don't pray out of laziness. ... sometimes I have boyfriends, and that's not allowed. Sometimes I lie, that's also not allowed. I don't wear a headscarf, that's also not allowed.... Last week in the Mosque I started to cry. There was an Imam who really gives himself to Islam, he was reading a part from the Qur'an and I started to cry really hard on hearing that part. I'm just a really bad Muslim, I want to be better.' The dimension of practice is so essential to Iman that her failure made her cry during a sermon. Her weakness is lived as guilt, as a sin. What is described here is far from a legitimate *bricolage*. Individual orthopraxis is seen as an essential dimension of faith for individual religiosity.

Though all girls seemed to agree with the fact that being a good Muslim is a matter of total practice, none of them applied Islam properly. As Amina said, 'it's really difficult to be a good Muslim.' For being a good Muslim as they see it involves a *total investment* of oneself into religious life, an investment one may never attain. Yet these same girls conveyed a second version of how to be a good Muslim which seemed to be closer to their personal spiritual quest, in which the notion of the *individual* is more central. As Amina explained, '... if you believe in your heart and as long as you think of yourself as a Muslim, and you believe in God and you find the values of Islam important, then you can call yourself a Muslim. But you don't have to listen to all the others who say "to be a Muslim you have to pray, you have to wear a headscarf" everybody decides it for themselves....' Amina clearly emphasizes the element of faith or what Babès describes as the religious *niyya*. Furthermore, she explicitly criticizes the 'communal' influence in religious practice. This seeming contradiction in describing a 'good Muslim' could be observed in the remarks of several other girls. When asked the question, 'Do you think you're a bad Muslim if you don't agree with some rules?' Nora responded, 'I don't think so. You try, and as long as you try you are Muslim I think. If you don't agree with something, you have the right not to agree.'

On the one hand Nora was convinced that a good Muslim should respect 'all' rules. On the other hand, she insisted on individual choice in faith and both challenges and criticizes the ways in which social pressures surround religious practice. When talking about Islamic religiosity and individualization, what seems to be refuted is the communal in-

fluence over religious practice rather than an individualized and 'free' relationship towards religious prescriptions. The girls criticize religious practice when it falls under the supervision of the community. Hence, religiosity is translated as an *exclusive* but *total* sacred relationship between God and the individual (Roy 2002).

Individualization through religious prescription

A way to overcome the seeming tension between the ideal of 'free will' and conformity to religious prescription is simply not to see them as such. Rather than view 'free will' as being jeopardized by acts of religious conformity, we can consider it as being obtained through a *search for religious prescriptions that legitimate individual choices*. To observe whether this process of individualization is happening, it would be interesting to observe to what extent 'new' interpretations are constructed which try to legitimize the 'unlegitimizable'. Selma's views about the prohibition of marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman can provide some insight on this point. She notes, 'I read a text a few months ago in which a daughter of a friend of the Prophet was married to someone, of the same kind, but he was an unbeliever, and she loved him until he finally converted. He was an unbeliever, but she married him.' These different observations seem to suggest that—when speaking about Muslims in Western-Europe who *primarily identify themselves through a religious lens*—an important reconsideration of the definition of *individualization* is to be made, namely: its *dissociation from the process of secularization*. Concerning Muslims in Western Europe we seem indeed to observe a process of individualization which is not occurring in a 'secular' way, but precisely through their ability to interpret religious prescriptions.

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Note

1. The data were collected from 2000–2001 and are based on 23 in-depth conversations with Moroccan girls aged between 16 and 18 and living in the city of Antwerp (Belgium).

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