

# Epilogue

## Islamization of Europe, or Europeanization of Islam?

What do thirteen centuries of Islam in Europe tell us? Does the story of this interaction consist of a series of episodes and events that we have conveniently thrown together under the title 'Islam in Europe'? Or is it justified to speak of a single experience or narrative that continues through the centuries? And if so, how can we characterize this experience? We have seen in the previous chapters that the European interaction with physical as well as virtual Islam has been very diverse. Muslims have been enemies and allies, foreigners and compatriots, Us and Them. Their civilization has been feared as aggressive and expansionist, but also praised for its religious tolerance and its culture that has produced great and innovative artists, scientists and intellectuals to which Europe is indebted. On the other hand, Europe has consistently upheld the picture of the Muslim Other that embodied everything that the European was not. Still, some patterns do emerge, and here the distinction between physical and virtual Islam is helpful.

### Historical Patterns

With regard to physical Islam, there are few, if any, patterns to be discerned in the European interactions with Islam until the late nineteenth century. Both sides have alternated in conquering each other's territories and, in consequence, created societies of religiously mixed populations. Both sides have for centuries more or less continuously been active in raiding and enslaving each other's populations. The same mutuality applies to the exchange of diplomatic missions. The only forms of interaction in which there was little initiative on the Muslim side were trade, adventurous exploration and the establishment of resident embassies or commercial outposts – throughout the centuries of interaction, these domains were dominated by the Europeans.

In all these interactions one cannot speak of two unified blocks facing each other; both the Muslim and Christian sides were fractured by internal differences and

strife, and common interests often called for military alliances and commercial treaties across the religious divide. On the other hand, both sides always upheld a self-image that strongly identified with religion – if not in the sense of commonly held religious beliefs, then at least as a shared culture. Religion as an identity marker was a source of many frictions within the Christian and Muslim communities, but also served as a rallying point when confronted with the other community. Let us examine this mechanism of diversity-in-unity by examining two issues: conquest and coexistence.

Thirteen centuries of belligerent interaction between Islam and Europe is not one of perpetual Muslim aggression vis-à-vis Europe, “the great *jihad par excellence*”.<sup>1</sup> Both the Islamic Arab and Christian European worlds were driven by intermitted periods of hunger for conquest, and it was geographical proximity that made the other a target, not religious fervour. Religion did play a role, however, as the additional driving force that vindicated war. It is presumptuous and even a form of European self-victimization to assume that Muslims, whether Moors in the eighth century or Ottomans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, saw Europe as their main target. They did not. The Arab Muslim conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries were targeting North Africa (westward) and Western Asia (eastward), while Spain was a mere extension of North Africa. And the Ottomans did indeed engage in regular military campaigns in Eastern Europe, but also did so towards Persia; the European domains made up only a part – albeit an economically and culturally important part – of their vast empire that stretched from Tunisia to Iraq and from Yemen to Hungary.

Even if the conquests in Europe were sideshows in Arab and Ottoman large-scale military operations, let us be clear on the fact that Europe was part of these conquests and consequently these wars are part of European history. But is it then justified to speak of the Crusades, the Reconquista, or the Balkan Wars as acts of European self-defence against Muslim aggression, as some authoritative figures tell us? Pope Urban II wanted his audience to believe so when he made his call for the First Crusade: his argument was that Jerusalem had to be re-taken. However, that call was made more than four centuries after the city had been taken by the Arab-Muslim armies. Moreover, we have seen that the recruitment for the crusade was successful for reasons that were more of an internal European nature than of foreign belligerency. In a similar vein, the historian Bernard Lewis claims that Europeans, by fighting in Spain against the Moors and rising in the Balkans against the Turk, were “restoring homelands to Christendom.”<sup>2</sup> This is an odd remark from a historian. In the case of Spain, for instance, the Catholic claim of Reconquista

may have been a justifiable emotion for the Catholic Spaniards of that time, but in the light of Spain's history of seven centuries of Roman rule, followed by two centuries of Visigoth Christian rule, and then eight centuries of Moorish Muslim rule, the claim that Spain was originally a Christian homeland is spurious. And in the case of the Ottoman Empire we have seen that many of the revolts were not people's uprisings against the yoke of the Ottoman, but often motivated by other factors.

Lewis takes the argument of European defence against Muslim aggression further when stating that the "complex process of European expansion and empire" has its "roots in the clash between Islam and Christendom": in his view, European expansionism is a result of the "long and bitter struggle of the conquered peoples of Europe, in east and west, to restore their homelands to Christendom and expel the Muslim peoples who had invaded and subjugated them."<sup>3</sup> In this European reconquest it was "hardly to be expected" that the vanquished Muslims would be merely left at the borders, and so "the victorious liberators, having reconquered their own home territories, pursued their former masters whence they had come". These sweeping statements are simply untrue. The Europeans who engaged in imperialist ventures in Muslim lands in Asia and Africa were not the Europeans who had been former subjects of Muslim rule: of these former Muslim subjects, the Spaniards and Portuguese were mainly active across the Atlantic, and the Balkan peoples have not engaged in any imperialist adventures at all. On the contrary, it was the European peoples that had not been affected by Moorish, Ottoman or any 'Islamic' domination, such as the English, French, Russians and Dutch, who were the colonists and imperialists in the African, Asian and Arab domains of the Muslim world. This can hardly be called a reaction to Muslim aggression.

Moreover, the imagery of European Christians rising against and expelling the dreaded Muslim occupier seems more a retroactive use of emotions and terminology that belonged to the American Revolution or the Second World War than substantiated by historical facts. The European-Christian "victorious liberators" (Lewis' terminology) in the Ottoman domains had to resort to carnage and conversion to create a "Christian homeland" that they had only recently invented. And the Catholic kings, when "liberating" Christian subjects from their Muslim rulers, did not take them into the fold of Christendom but recognized them as a separate community, first tolerated with their own religious courts and rites, just like the Muslims and the Jews, and later persecuted by the Inquisition.

I would argue that the wars and insurgencies against the two main Muslim powers in Europe – Umayyad ('Moorish') and Ottoman – were not Christian uprisings

against centuries of bondage, but were part of a development on a much grander scale that took place between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe: the formation of nation-states where people with a single identity (cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious) lived within a single territory under majority rule. Oppressive and violent means were often deployed to achieve this goal, starting with the expulsion and forced conversions of Muslims and Jews in Spain in the late fifteenth century (the Jews of Western Europe had already experienced extradition in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), then religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, followed by the fragmentation of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires and, most recently, the civil wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

An interaction of an entirely different nature between Europe and physical Islam was the coexistence of religious communities as a result of conquests by one of the parties. It is not always clear to what extent the conqueror was welcomed; this seems to have been the case when the Arabs conquered Spain and in some instances of the early periods of Ottoman conquests in the Balkans; but such welcome seems to have been absent during the Crusades in the Middle East and the Reconquista in Spain. Nevertheless the reaction of subjugated peoples appears to have been more pragmatic than principled: if the conqueror provided security, a reasonable tax burden and a degree of religious and cultural freedom then he was acceptable to most people.

In the situation of religiously mixed societies religion played a prominent role in the regulation of social order. Religious identity was such that it provided not only a powerful self-identity, but also a social frame of reference. Social and political life in religiously mixed communities might be determined by a variety of factors, and piety among their peoples might differ from person to person, but the underlying structure was controlled by the dichotomy of believer and unbeliever. Religion was the most important identity marker that decided the demarcation lines between the communities in terms of believers versus unbelievers and accordingly set the rules of engagement between those communities. This order did not necessarily have to reflect everyday reality in the interaction among people, but was imposed from above: the ruling elite represented the believer and all other communities were categorized under the single title of unbelievers.

Such was the case in the Christian as well as Islamic realms in Europe until well into the nineteenth century. Religion was the measuring stick that maintained fixed boundaries between believers and unbelievers (heretics as third category had to be persecuted) that could at times perhaps be crossed socially and economically, but

only within certain limits. Sexual relations, joining the military, being eligible for slavery or becoming part of the ruling elite were such limits, and crossing these lines required that one converted. Tensions and revolts in realms with religiously mixed societies in pre-modern Europe were often for social or economic reasons, but almost automatically acquired a religious dimension since that was the factor delineating the structural differences in such society.

If there is any pattern to be seen in the interaction between Europe and physical Islam, it is that they have interacted in a variety of ways like any other countries or communities at any given time. The main difference is that Europeans and Muslims did not *feel* that they were the same. This was the domain of the interaction between Europe and the Islam that we have called virtual Islam. Whereas we found few patterns in the case of physical Islam, the interaction with virtual Islam – that is all interaction involving ideas, images and knowledge about Islam – has been quite consistent through the centuries. This interaction can be summarized as conflict: in the studies, polemics and images of Islam, Europeans have mostly – not always – maintained a position of antagonism towards Islam. Even the Protestants who claimed preference for Turkish over Catholic rule still dismissed Islam as a heresy at best. Islam represented more than a mere religion; it was presented as the opposite of European Christian identity, and this otherness was discerned in many aspects, some of which have survived until now with remarkable tenacity: Islam is intolerant; Islam is degrading towards women; Islam incites violence; Islam is anti-intellectual; Islam prevents progress; Islam is against democracy and secularism – and to all of these we must add: unlike us, Europeans of Christian stock. These conceptions and views of Islam can easily be justified by historical facts. But we may equally easily find historical facts that will back up the opposite argument. The diversity of the interaction of Europe with physical Islam provides us with such a rich source of historical realities – intellectualism as well as ignorance, benevolent rule and despotism, religious tolerance and oppression of religion – that they can be used in any kind of argument. We have seen in the Introduction to what different conclusions two eminent historians like Bulliet and Lewis have come on the basis of the same history of European-Islamic relations.

The explanation for the negative image of Islam as the European Other must therefore be sought not in physical Islam, but in virtual Islam. Physical Islam represents the inclusive Other who is different and strange and perhaps even repulsive, but who at best is a source of fascination or admiration, and at worst is someone one has to put up with in order to conduct business or keep diplomatic ties or

maintain neighbourly relations. Virtual Islam, on the other hand, is a representation of the exclusive Other who is truly different in a negative way.<sup>4</sup> Virtual Islam allowed the European to develop or maintain ideas about Islam without the need to check with reality. Much, if not most, of the image of Islam and its adherents has been developed, studied, cherished and passed on by the many Europeans who had never met a Muslim in their lives. Insofar as they received first-hand information from Ottoman lands and later also from Muslim societies in European Empires, this information was not provided to them by those who lived there, but by their compatriot Europeans who travelled or worked in those lands and returned with their personal experiences. Even in societies where Muslims and Christians lived together, as in the Balkans, the togetherness was mostly one of segregation: either they lived removed from each other, or they knew little of each other.

### Patterns into the Present

The European initiatives to create nation-states that were ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously homogeneous reached an apotheosis with the two great wars in the first half of the twentieth century. After that, Europe took a radically different course by implementing a system that had already been under construction for some time: a political and legal structure that allowed for diversity by guaranteeing fundamental rights and a rule of law. Religion as the main source of social and legal structuring was replaced by the notions of liberty and equality: each individual was to pursue his own lifestyle, voice his own opinion and practise his own religion, and in doing so all individuals were to be treated equally before the law regardless of their religion, gender, colour or political affiliation.

In Western Europe the sudden and numerous presence of Muslims since the 1970s has challenged this new political-legal constellation, not because Muslims were against it – on the contrary, it provided them with the freedom to maintain their identity – but because it revealed that the underlying infrastructure of national, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious unity was still in place, either in practice or as an assumed quality of society. It was a self-imposed predicament: Europeans cherished the new political-legal values that granted freedoms to everyone, but these same values demanded that Europeans allowed people to have and practise religious and cultural values and customs that were alien to them. The antipathy that some Western Europeans harboured against foreign migrants who came in large numbers from the 1970s onwards was therefore not only of a socio-economical nature –

they were accused of stealing jobs and undermining European society by purportedly refusing to integrate – but also of a cultural nature: allowing different values and customs that were allegedly not European was considered disruptive to European society. This applied in particular to Muslims, resulting in the particular form of anxiety called Islamophobia.

Nevertheless, Muslims in Western Europe were gradually entering all echelons of society. This is a dramatic change from all previous centuries of Muslim-Christian coexistence where religion dictated one's position in society. As mentioned, the new political-legal constellation in Europe had replaced this social order with one based on non-discrimination and personal liberty. These rights were arguably already in place in earlier times (one needs to just think of the American and French bills of rights of the late eighteenth century), but it took another century and a half to put these rights into practice: Jews, coloured, women and gays all had to fight prolonged battles to claim equal treatment. The European Muslims of today may be suffering similar forms of discrimination, but they definitely benefitted from the many minority struggles that preceded theirs. The rapid rise of some Muslims to positions of prominence in European politics and government, and their gradual formation into representative bodies and vocal lobby groups are mere examples of their relatively advantageous position in this respect. In the particular case of the Muslims, however, there are two factors that distinguish them from other minority communities: religion and historical ballast.

With regard to religion we have seen that modern Europe is distinctively secularized in two ways: religion is not important in the lives of the European majority, and that same majority does not appreciate the manifestation of religion in the public domain. This attitude has become incorporated into the European psyche and many Europeans therefore feel ill at ease when confronted with actions and behaviour that are of a distinct religious nature. We have seen that most modern scholars study such actions and behaviour with a focus on issues like ethnicity, culture and migration, with religion merely being an additional factor that may compound social and economic processes. Much of the political and public discourse, however, takes the other extreme by explaining Muslim behaviour in terms of religion only. The sale of Qurans in the Western world peaked after the attacks of 9/11, as did that of many other books on Islam. This is a continuation of the centuries-old European tradition of studying Muslims by means of Islamic scripture and texts. When I am invited by teachers' unions, police academies or medical schools to talk "about Islam", they never want to know about the prophet, the meaning of Ramadan or pilgrimage to Mecca, or the tenets of Islam: they want to know if there is anything special about

these people that makes them different – because that is what they experience in their interactions with them at work – and assume that it is Islam.

Apparently religion has not disappeared from the social equation in Europe even though it has dissipated as an official form of ordering society and modern Europe has to a large extent secularized. Religion has stayed, but taken different forms. While secularization gradually removed religion from the public domain, the great European narrative of ‘Christian Europe’ is continued, albeit in a cultural manner. This religious anchoring of European identity by default excluded Jews and later also Muslims. Granted, it is fashionable to speak of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’, but the ‘Judeo’ part is only a politically correct supplement that came into use after the horrors of the Holocaust. In addition to this cultural meaning, religion also plays a second, important role in modern Europe. In times when religion is of much less importance to a majority of the European population,<sup>5</sup> their understanding and consideration for those who are still religious have also become less. From the perspective of religious people, regardless of their religion, such environment can be considered unfriendly or even hostile. This staunchly secular or even anti-religious environment is not exclusively targeting devout Muslims, because it targets all religious believers, but it has definitely contributed to the Muslims’ sense of alienation, a feeling multiplied by the fact that they are mostly of foreign origin.

The second factor that distinguishes Muslims from other minorities is the historical ballast of the old notion of the Muslim as the European Other. Here again we see an uninterrupted continuation of Othering that has taken place in the previous centuries: Muslims are not European, because they are not secular, not woman-friendly, intrinsically violent, primitive in their customs. An often-heard explanation of this different attitude inserts a time element into this process of Othering: the Muslim is placed in another, pre-modern time from that of the modern European, as if he is literally behind, so that the two live together but in parallel time frames.<sup>6</sup> Some add yet another element to the Muslim Other: he is not merely different, but a foreigner who does not belong here. We have seen this with regard to the Moors and the Ottoman Turk, and nowadays again in the reaction to Muslim radicals and terrorists. The European leftist radicals and terrorists of the 1970s were feared, frowned upon and sometimes prosecuted, but never was it suggested that they should be deported, as has been proposed with Muslim radicals and terrorists who were born and raised in Europe. In the former case, the Other was ‘our’ problem; in the latter case the Other was a problem imposed on ‘us’ from the outside. A large part of this sentiment has been attributed to the changing notion of borders;

whereas they used to keep people out, they were crossed by immigrants and have now been made permeable by globalism and transnationalism.<sup>7</sup>

That said, we must keep in mind that it does not hold for all Europeans; some do not see a problem at all, and many Europeans work hard and conscientiously to understand their Muslim patients, juvenile delinquents, students and neighbours so that they can more easily engage with them.

While the issues of religion and historical ballast may have made the position of the modern European Muslim different from that of other minorities, and while the main obstacle to the devout Muslim may be the secular nature of modern Europe (an obstacle the Muslim shares with devout Christians, Jews, Hindus and other faithful), the most pressing problem in current times to my mind is the issue of tolerance. I contend that tolerance has undergone a drastic transformation because of the modern notion of equality.

In earlier times, racial, religious and gender differences were regulated by hierarchical orders that gave everyone pre-fixed positions in the social order, whether divinely or imperially ordained: “[i]mperial rule is historically the most successful way of incorporating difference and facilitating (requiring is more accurate) peaceful existence.”<sup>8</sup> Equality, on the other hand, demands an affirmative recognition of others and of each other’s differences. Consequently, equality has drastically altered the notion of toleration. Before, the ruling community or majority indulged itself by allowing for certain differences in its subjects or the minority, respectively. From its position of power, it determined what the limits of acceptable differences were as practised by its subjects or minorities, and demanded full recognition of its own ways. This situation no longer holds. Equality has turned the power mechanism that was essential to tolerance into a reciprocal process: we will recognize you (and your differences) if you do the same to us.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of modern Europe, this change is a serious challenge to the perceived self-evidence of the culture of the majority. According to the principles of their own political-legal structure, native Europeans cannot claim a majority position demanding that their religious or cultural values are imposed on others. The notion of tolerance has changed accordingly and has acquired a new meaning: as recognition. One is to recognize the differences of the other – within the framework of the parameters set by the law, of course – but this has become subject to negotiation: the European Muslim is asked to acknowledge loyalty to his society, while the Muslim is prepared to do so only on the condition that he is recognized as Muslim, a notion of religious identity that many secular Europeans find difficult to deal with.

The transformation of the notion of tolerance lies at the heart of the European struggle with immigrants and, more particularly, Muslims. The European demand for cultural integration may contradict the immigrant's or Muslim's right to be different, and to be treated as an equal in that respect. According to Talal Asad, this is at the root of Europe's identity crisis. He argues that Europeans are not self-assuredly declaring who they are, but anxiously demanding that Others recognize who they, the Europeans, are: "(instead of) 'This is my name,' we now declare 'I need you to recognize me by that name'."<sup>10</sup>

### ... To Be Extrapolated into the Future?

From this evaluation of the present let us now look into the future. How will the interaction between Islam and Europe develop? Some observers speak hopefully of the emergence of a "European Islam"; others are worried about the trend of orthodoxy among European Muslims and fear an 'Islamization' of Europe. Have Europe and Islam indeed reached a juncture that will prove crucial to their future, so that we are facing a choice between either "Islamization of Europe" or "Europeanization of Islam", as some would have us believe?<sup>11</sup>

From a European perspective the notion of "Islamization of Europe" is not a neutral observation indicating that Europe is experiencing more of the presence of Muslims – and hence Islam – than it had before; it is a notion of concern, possibly of fear. It is the anxiety about Europe losing its identity, irrevocably transforming into something that it should not. We have seen that it is hard to assess the exact numbers of Muslims in Europe, and that it is almost impossible to gauge their religiousness, but they are a tiny minority. Also, the fear that Islam by its nature drives Muslims to impose their values on their environment is not justified by the facts. Insofar as they claim space in the secular European domain to apply certain rules of Islam, it appears to be exclusively for their own use. Of course there are zealous Muslims in Europe calling for the spread of Islam and who welcome any convert to Islam, but they are not unlike the many Christian missionary movements active in Europe. But even if, for the sake of argument, we were to assume that Muslims have hidden agendas of domination, it is quite striking that Europeans demonstrate so little faith in the strength of their own values and structures to withstand the allegedly different Islamic values of a very small minority.

Just as the notion "Islamization of Europe" is biased because it reflects an anxiety, so is its mirror-notion "Europeanization of Islam" based on preconceptions because

it reflects – from the perspective of many Europeans – an optimistic anticipation. It is the expectation that Muslims, under the influence of European liberalism and enlightenment, will transform their Islam into a moderate religion. It is therefore dumbfounding to many Europeans that the younger generation of Muslims in Europe in particular is more religiously orthodox than the previous generation: how can someone who is born and raised in a European secular, liberal society and education system adhere to religion even more strongly than his or her parents? The puzzlement about this alleged paradox is typical for Europeans; Americans, for example, will have fewer problems understanding this situation because they are much more accustomed to public intellectuals, scholars, scientists and politicians who are also devout believers and publicly declare themselves to be so.

If there is any Europeanization of Islam, it is that Muslims are living in Europe, and have adopted the European political-legal framework that provides them with opportunities to practise their religion in ways they want to – opportunities that they would not have in most Muslim-majority countries. At present many Muslims in Europe use their freedom of religion to pursue an orthodox interpretation of Islam, but this in itself does not justify the conclusion that such development is anathema to European values or identity, nor that it will continue with the next generations of European Muslims. What we are currently witnessing is Muslims of migrant origin who are coming to terms with their particular European environment as well as with an understanding of their identity, and consequently will have to negotiate ways to adapt to a European religious-cultural and political-legal environment and find ways to solve conflicts between that environment and their Islamic tenets and identities. This dialectic of critical engagement by European Muslims is not new: it is a process that began in the period between the two World Wars<sup>12</sup> and has regained its intensity from the 1990s onwards.<sup>13</sup> An interesting role in this respect is being played by Balkan Muslims who have a much longer and richer experience with Islam in Europe, and therefore deplore the fact that Western European Muslims, as relative newcomers to the European scene, have so little, if any, interest in their experiences.<sup>14</sup>

The two-choice question between Islamization of Europe and Europeanization of Islam, therefore, is a misguided way of looking at the phenomenon of ‘Islam in Europe’. If there ever was a choice with regard to the future of Islam and its role in Europe, it is a choice that Europe needs to make: will it adhere to its political-legal values, such as liberalism, equality, human rights and democracy, and by consequence allow for and recognize the many differences that new Europeans will bring, or will it block these differences by emphasizing a homogenous set of – allegedly

‘European’ – religious-cultural values? The burka bans in Belgium and France are a typical sign of the latter: irrespective of whether one agrees or disagrees with those bans, they were essentially a legalization of cultural values, of ‘this is how we do things here’. Although enshrining cultural values in legal statutes may reaffirm European cultural identities, such an approach carries the distinct risk that it denies other, fundamental values proclaimed by the European political-legal framework.