

The Backward and the New: National, Transnational and Post-national Islam in Europe

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Abstract

The background to this paper is the need to reconcile at theoretical and political levels the quest for recognition of Muslims in Europe and in the West more generally (the subject of increasing Islamophobia and racism), with skepticism towards essentialist and uncritical understandings of Islam. Whereas in Europe there is a growing tendency to celebrate the challenges that the presence of transnational Muslim identities pose to the presumed universal nature of the liberal nation-state, democratic, secular constituencies, and Middle Eastern feminist, are denouncing relativistic approaches towards Islam in the West as the expression of an emergent alliance between multiculturalism, neo-orientalism, and religious fundamentalism. My contribution to the unfastening of this theoretical and political deadlock is to demonstrate the multiple meanings and practices of being Muslim in Europe, and reveal the contradictions and contestations embedded within them. The paper sheds light on the uneasiness that some young Muslims feel about the dichotomous constructions which mark off the debate on Muslim identities in both the academic and political arena. My aim is to show that Muslims' experiences in the West are inscribed in and cross cut diverse socio-political identities, challenging the presumed dichotomy which opposes universalism to difference. And yet, far from being simple acts of *bricolage*, these processes of identity renegotiation are deeply painful and conflictual.

Keywords : Islam, Youth, Transnationalism, Europe, Public Sphere.

Introduction

The idea for this paper emerges from a dilemma that I feel particularly intensely as someone who is personally and academically involved with both issues of Muslims in the West and of women and gender relations in the Middle East. The background to these reflections is the need to reconcile at theoretical and political levels the quest for recognition of Muslims in Europe and in the West more generally, who are the subject of increasing Islamophobia and racism, with a legitimate skepticism towards an essentialist and uncritical understanding of Islam. On the one hand there is an increasing tendency to celebrate the challenges that the presence of transnational Muslim identities pose to the presumed universal and secular (but in fact nationalistic and ethnocentric) nature of nation-states, or to perceive Islamism as a driving force of modernism and democratisation (Utvik 2003). On the other hand, democratic, secular constituencies, and Middle Eastern feminists denounce the dangers of cultural relativistic approaches towards Islam in the West, seeing them as an expression of the emergence of an unconventional alliance between multiculturalism, neo-orientalism and projects of religious fundamentalism. Scholars such as Al-Azmeh (1993), Moghadam (2002), and Moghissi (1999) underline the ground shared between multiculturalist views and understandings of Islam with those emanating from Islamist constituencies, highlighting how they draw on the same narratives to claim a reified idea of Islam as the most ‘authentic’ ground for the identities of Muslims around the world.

My consideration in this regard is twofold. On the one hand, essentialist and self-defensive dispositions towards Islam in the West, although understandable in the current

political context, may lead and have indeed often led, to a kind of hands-off approach, favoured by an extreme cultural relativism which discounts universal values as not valid for the Middle East and for Muslims communities in the West. On the other hand, although sound and politically challenging, secular and feminist voices, whether speaking from or of the specific political and geographical angle of the Middle East, run the risk of overlooking the very complex reality and the diverse and conflictual, political and cultural projects that characterise European Islam. Moreover, they fail to recognize the processes of adaptation that Islam is undergoing in the context of secular Europe and the claims that are expressed through the activation of Islamic identities in Europe.

In order to shed light on the uneasiness that some young Muslims feel about the dichotomous constructions which mark off the debate on Muslim identities in both academic and political arenas, I will present a specific way of contesting essentialist and dichotomous representations of difference and religious identity. I am concerned with the everyday constructions and relations of young second generation Muslims whose lives are not so much caught up in struggles between two different cultures, the ‘Western’ or ‘European’ *versus* the ‘Islamic’ one, but who are, rather, striving to resist hegemonic attempts to reduce their identities to essentialised ideological entities, and who are attempting to destabilise these hegemonic representations. It is in this context, albeit from a specific viewpoint, that my informant Said, whose views are discussed below, gives voice to concerns similar to those of other Muslim women and men I interviewed in the course of my doctoral research who expressed the feeling of being at odds with reified mainstream constructions of identity and religion (Salih 2003). Muslims’ experiences in the West are inscribed in and cross cut diverse socio-political and cultural identities. Yet, far from being simple acts of *bricolage*, these processes of identity renegotiation are deeply painful and conflictual.

My contribution to the unfastening of the theoretical and political deadlock is to demonstrate the multiple meanings and practices of being Muslim in Europe, and reveal the contradictions and contestations embedded within them. As in the Middle East, so too in Europe a variety of approaches towards Islam emerge out of the intermingling of global, transnational and local forces and affiliations. As we shall see, 'European Islam' could be conceived of as the result of a process of adaptation to a European context of a universal religion, but it also has to be understood as a contested terrain which discloses an unresolved tension between transnational and national agendas, loyalties and identities. A new European public sphere is emerging where young Muslims are actively seeking to promote new and changing frontiers of identity and political activity. One example is Femyso, the Forum of European Muslims Youth and Student Organisations, which was established in 1996 and which official mission is 'to be a platform for youth organisations to congregate, exchange information, gain experience and benefit from each other, to work for a better Europe' (see Website www.femyso.org/). Among its priorities is 'the development of a European Muslim Identity, via the involvement of Muslim youth in discussions, educational and awareness programmes, highlighting their social responsibilities and contribution to Europe'. Indeed, the description of the organisation's aims underlines how 'with over 25 million Muslims present in East and West Europe, there is a desperate need for Muslims across Europe to have a voice within the European structures and also to meet to co-ordinate and co-operate', Some scholars have seen in bodies like Femyso the 'practical implementation of something like a European Islam' (Mandaville 2003: 34).

Several issues in this paper are discussed through the experience and narratives of Said, a young university student, born in Morocco and brought up in Italy, who has a

prominent position in the local, the national and the European public spheres as an active young Muslim. He is the spokesperson and one of the leaders of the Association of Young Muslims of Italy (*Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, an organization with more than three hundred members) and a member of the Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue within the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe. He is also a member of the youth section of the *Democratici di Sinistra* (the former Communist Party in Italy). Therefore, although not based on systematic interviews with second generation Muslims, the paper gives voice to new emerging trends and conflicts: between national and European spheres as competing arenas for political action, between national and transnational aspirations and affiliations and between the claim for recognition of Muslims as a religious minority and the rights to full citizenship. Given his official roles in several national and European Muslim's organizations, Said represents a significant political agent as witnessed by the fact that interviews with him appear very often on the national and the local press⁽¹⁾.

One of the most interesting emerging trends among second generation Muslims, though not the only one, is the abandonment of the national as the main or the only political and discursive arena where cultural and identity politics is played out. The nation-state is increasingly conceived by second generation Muslims as operating through an exclusionary process which not only denies them access to citizenship but also fails to acknowledge emerging new identities on the one hand by persisting in crystallising Muslims as permanent and essential 'others', and on the other by offering them assimilation to the national community through a logic which restricts Muslim politics and identities to a 'minority standpoint'. The Italian minister of Interior made this clear in an interview (21 January 2003) in the national newspaper *La Repubblica* when he launched a campaign to come to an agreement with 'the moderate Muslims', in order to isolate the extremist constituencies:

It is natural that the idea of the silent Islamic invasion creates anxiety also amongst many liberal souls and worries public opinion. I try to understand the Italian Islamic community in order to find within it valid interlocutors who could be representative and reliable. Certainly I do not want to leave it at the mercy of its several souls and I want instead to offer a national way to dialogue and recomposition.

He continued:

We have to quickly offer to moderate Muslims a good policy which aim should be not so much *immediate integration*, but rather a gradual inclusion or at least a quiet cohabitation within Italian society which has received them and which is available to keep them both as respectful guests and as full citizens, with the same rights and duties of all Italians. To the extremists, on the other hand, we have to react with rigour and determination (my emphases).

Italian Political Culture and the Islamisation of Identities

In the last twenty years we have witnessed an Islamisation of political discourse and representations over Muslims, a phenomenon which was certainly fuelled by the events of 9/11 and after. This has affected not only the ways in which Muslims around the Islamic world increasingly understand the relation between themselves and a politically constructed idea of the West, but also the ways in which Muslims are perceived and represented in Europe and more generally in the West itself. This became evident during the research I was conducting for my doctoral dissertation in the late 1990's, when I realised how Islam, and much less so other defining characters, had become the crucial marker in defining the

boundaries of insider-hood or outsider-hood within Europe. This surprised me since in the course of my life in Italy I had never been asked to define myself in terms of my religion or origin but, if any recall to my ‘difference’ emerged, these were in terms of my national or political identity as a Palestinian, as a daughter of Arabs, and to a much lesser degree, as a member of a Muslim family. I believe this has to do partly with the way Islam is being constructed in Italy and Europe. Indeed, by and large, Italian media and public debates where Islam is addressed regularly allude to, or are indeed based on, the assumption that, if not properly a ‘clash of civilisation’ there is however attrition between a modern and secular society where women enjoy freedom and have long acquired emancipation and Muslims, who are portrayed as persevering in their religious and anti-modern conceptualisation of society and gender relations, if not as terrorist, warriors or conquerors of a foreign land.

This tendency, which dramatically intensified after the events of 9/11, rather than shedding light on cultural interconnections, tends increasingly to conceive of the world in Manichean terms as composed of separate and self-contained ‘civilisations’. It is not surprising that in the aftermath of the attacks to the World Trade Centre in New York, the Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi felt legitimated to argue, without any embarrassment, that ‘Western civilisation’ is superior to ‘Islamic civilisation’. In this context, it is not astonishing that the multicultural rhetoric that draws upon the narrative of a respect for ‘cultural difference’, where ‘Muslim culture and religion’ is portrayed in essentialist and reified terms, could easily provide a fertile terrain for racist arguments about the nature of Muslims’ difference. For example, Todorov argues that ‘contemporary xenophobia accommodates itself perfectly well to the call for the “right to be different”’: an entirely consistent relativist may demand that all foreigners go home, so they can live surrounded by their own values (Todorov 1993: 60, cited by Grillo 2003: 164).

Intellectuals of different sorts have also contributed to fostering a neo-colonialist and neo-orientalist image of Muslims as the ‘Other’ par excellence. For example, a well known Italian political theorist, teaching in the United States and a columnist in a major national newspaper, is openly propounding the theory that Muslims are too different to be integrated in the European countries where they reside, where they can, at best, be tolerated (see Sartori 2000). But creating anxiety on the other hand is also the extreme cultural relativism endorsed by certain postmodernist positions echoed in academic writings and discussions on Islam, by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, who, in the name of the end of western dominant narratives, increasingly contest the presuppositions of western modernity. Secularism, from this angle, is seen as something ultimately external to the Muslim world on the basis that it was historically imposed by western or westernised powers and is in fact not compatible with the ‘authentic nature’ of Muslim societies (for example, Esposito and Tamimi 2000).

These trends are denounced as anti-progressive by secular and feminist scholars of the Middle East, who underline not only ‘a convergence of the seemingly radical, anti-representational view with a fundamentalist conservatism’ but claim how, ‘concepts of universality, equality, modernity and human rights are lost’ at a tremendous cost to women in the Islamic world (Moghissi 1999: 47, see also Moghadam 2002). Yet, self-representations and narratives of Muslim constituencies are not independent from the dichotomous construction of an ‘Islamic *versus* a European way of living’ forged by the neo-orientalist and multicultural rhetoric. On the contrary, they may be inscribed in, and often reproduce, the binary categories of the Oriental multicultural discourse that construct them as ‘different’. Indeed, like the power of Orientalism, the efficacy of the multicultural discourse around Muslims should be sought in its power to produce the constructions it names and speaks about (Yegenoglu 1998).

The post-modern narratives around difference are met with enthusiasm by the most conservative Islamist activists whose political project is to reinvent an 'authentic' Islamic culture, society and politics, purified from western connotations (Levine 2002). Bassam Tibi, for example, contends that

Although by no means multiculturalists, the Islamists among the migrants to Europe are nevertheless usually more sympathetic to multicultural positions than they are to democratic integration. The reason is that they understand perfectly well how to instrumentalize multicultural views-how to make use of them for fundamentalists end' (Tibi 2002: 38).

The attempt to retrieve an 'authentic', 'pure' 'untouched' cultural identity is invoked as an antidote to Westernisation and globalisation and may become particularly salient amongst Muslim migrant women and men who reside in the West. Indeed, the global rise of a discourse and political project which constructs Islam as an arena untouched by Western globalisation and colonialism and as the only 'culturally authentic' alternative to Western modernity is very often proposed to understand the increasing role of Islam in marking cultural identities among migrants in Europe (and in the Middle East for that matter). The numerous Internet sites and TV satellite broadcast which provide suggestions on how to lead an 'authentic' Islamic life in the West bear witness to this process. One interesting French site is *Musulmanes et Fières de l'être* (www.musulmane.com/), with numerous suggestions and articles on themes ranging from how to raise children in an Islamic way in the West without losing an Islamic identity, to how to follow other Islamic prescriptions in matters such as marriage, divorce and related matters.

It is certainly true that many Muslims, first and second generation, responded to their social and cultural experiences of displacement and marginalisation in Europe by adopting Islam as an alternative to assimilation and cultural homogenisation. While in several ways it can be connected to, and indeed stems from Islamic transnational resurgence, for the majority of Muslims in Europe Islam represents a project of self determination. It is the opinion of several scholars that the vast majority of the organised forms of Islam in Europe work within the framework of the secularised societies of which they feel part, and where they want to be recognised as religious minorities, and this contributes to fostering a real *laïcité* (see among others, Cesari 2002). However, by demanding full recognition from European states and societies, Islam inevitably urges a redefinition of the public/private distinctions on which liberal European nation-states are based. Many Muslims born and brought up in Europe contest the marginalisation of their Islamic identities to the private sphere and perceive their political and cultural construction as a ‘minority’ as a limitation of their participation in public and political life. Instead, what they ask is a reshaping of the relation between public and private, between secular and religious spheres.

Competing Agendas: National and Transnational Islams

One might argue that a process of universalisation and transnationalisation of Islam is taking place amongst Muslims in Europe. It has been suggested for example that the neo-communitarian version of Islam adopted by the second generation is neo-universalistic in nature as compared to the deep ethnic legacy ingrained in their parents’ Islam. (Khosrokhavar 1997: 61) On the other hand, the idea of an imagined community as a transnational *umma*, or a transethnic Islamic identity, is far from representing the only or the most important process at work. According to Cesari for example,

The question of whether the religion group should reinforce or transcend ethnic bonds has become the most contentious issue surrounding organised Islam in the West. This debate has given rise to a fierce competition among religious leaders seeking to impose their own conception of the community in different European countries (2003: 257-258).

Disagreements arise due to differing political and social views on the socio-political role of Islam in a non Islamic society, and this holds particularly true in Italy where Muslims express diverse traditions of Islam. Currently there are estimated to be around 488.300 Muslims in Italy (Caritas 2002, but other sources provide different figures, for example Pacini [2000]suggests a number of 600.000 and Muslim organisations suggest a higher figure of around one million). The largest groups are from Morocco (156.513), Albania (100.884), Tunisia (46,262), Senegal (33,070), Egypt (23,549), , Pakistan (17,693), Bangladesh (17,510) and Algeria (11,531) with significant minorities from Nigeria, Turkey, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia and India (Caritas, 2002). Through diverse ideologies of Islam, larger arenas of conflict are expressed which could be generational, political, gendered and ethnic. Conflicts over divergent ways of conceiving oneself as Muslim in a non-Muslim place are often articulated in terms of, and reinforced by reference to, ethnic cleavages between, say, 'Moroccans' or 'Middle Easterners'. Indeed, focusing on the nature of the controversies among diverse Muslim constituencies in Italy offers a vantage point for unfolding the relationship and latent tensions between national and transnational agendas and the ways in which these are articulated with notions around the universal character of Islam.

These arenas of conflict emerge vividly when it comes to the issue of who has a legitimate case to represent Muslims in the political sphere. Muslim organisations in Italy are urged to co-ordinate their views so as to be able to put a unique signature to the *Intesa*, the agreement with the Italian state, currently under negotiation, which will bring formal recognition of Muslims as a religious minority in Italy (Allievi 1997a). The first organisation to present a draft for an *Intesa* was the UCOII (*Unione delle comunità Islamiche d'Italia*), a federation of various mosques and Islamic centres in Italy, founded in 1990 by the USMI (*Unione degli Studenti Musulmani in Italia*) and reflecting, by and large, the views of Muslim immigrants, but which also has within its ranks some prominent Muslim converts: its spokesperson is in fact an Italian convert. The organisation, although arguing that it has the greatest claim to represent Muslims in Italy, is opposed by other organisations, especially those emanating from among Italian converts, for reasons outlined below.

Other organisations which have emerged claiming to represent Muslims in Italy, among which are those representing Italian converts, include COREIS (Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana), AMI (*Associazione Musulmani Italiani*), and a minor organisation, the AI.II. (*Associazione Italiana Internazionale per l'Informazione sull'Islam*). All have rather difficult, conflicting relations with the UCOII. A further organisation on the scene is the CICI (*Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia*), which runs the largest mosque in Europe located in Monte Antenne, in Rome (inaugurated in 1995 and known as the 'Embassies' Mosque' for its links with Muslim countries who financed it, principally all Saudi Arabia). This mosque claims to be the legitimate body to deal with the state, since it is the only one which has so far gained a formal recognition as a religious and moral entity (Allievi 1997b). The UCOII, on the other hand, claims that the CICI cannot represent Muslims because it embodies the interests of the Muslim countries which financed it, and does not therefore have a national or

local legitimacy to speak for migrants and other Muslims who live in Italy. The same applies to the Italian COREIS which is also accused of not representing the majority of Muslims, who are migrants, as it speaks mainly for converts.

Muslim converts' organisations assert their primacy over others in negotiating the *Intesa* with the Italian state and have in the past proposed their own draft *Intesa*. Their prominent role is also a consequence of the fact that the *Intesa* is formally intended as a covenant between the state and its national citizens who profess other religions. Muslim immigrants, unless Italian citizens, are not entitled to take part in the *Intesa*. This testifies to the subordination of minority rights to a traditional conceptualisation of the relation between state and citizens, where non-citizens are excluded from the contract. As a result, converts play a crucial role in the public sphere, a role of legitimation and mediation between Muslims and the rest of the society (Allievi 2002).

Italian converts very often propose a textual version of Islam, representing it as a universal religion, and disassociating it from the various traditions in which Islam developed. More firmly than Muslims by birth, converts' discourses are imbued with references to 'authenticity' and the adoption of the texts as the only reliable sources. In this context, their emphasis on the universal nature of Islam does not aim at affirming unity over diversity, but rather at underlining the legitimate nature of a European, or rather Italian culturally based Islam, against the common association of the 'authentic' Islam with the Arab-Muslim world. For example, Ahmad 'Abd Al Waliyd Vincenzo, writing in a national newspaper ('Islam, quella religione che l'Italia non vuole vedere' ['Islam, the religion that Italy does not want to see'] *Il Manifesto*, 27 Dicembre 1998) protested against what he thought to be a stereotypical representation that implies that to be an authentic Muslim one should 'think and behave as an

Arab’, and urged the creation of an Italian or European Islam freed from the intrusions of ‘foreign’, ‘fundamentalist’, as he defined them, ideologies and constituencies. Statements like these reflect the attempts by Italian Muslims to nationalise, as it were, Islam, negotiating the boundaries of its universalism by paradoxically contesting its transnational character.

Most converts’ organisations, from their various organisations, criticise the UCOII for its perspective on political conflicts in different parts of the Islamic world. In the past, the positions expressed in *Il Musulmano*, the former journal of the UCOII which ceased to exist for financial reasons a few years ago, were considered too close to those of Islamic political organisations such as Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and the FIS. Overall, Italian Muslims blame the UCOII for the lack of a democratic political culture and refuse to recognise it as a legitimate representative of Italian-Islam, on the ground that it is ‘driven from abroad’. The UCOII and other figures close to it, on the other hand, argue that they represent most of the Islamic centres in Italy and justify the positions taken by their former journal as well as by some of their imams by asserting the democratic and plural nature of their organisation which encourages an open debate by allowing the expression of different political positions⁽²⁾.

Said: Overcoming Factionalism, Reconciling Difference with Universalism

I have known Said for several years and, on and off I have shared with him numerous conversations on different issues. Before meeting him, I knew his mother Zubida, whom I had met in a mosque in Reggio Emilia during my previous research among Islamist women. An assiduous presence in the mosque and mother of four boys, two of whom were born in Italy and two in Morocco, she once expressed her fear that her older son, Said, a teenager active in a national Muslim youth association, would in the future abandon Islam as a

principal identity reference. Zubida told me she noticed that her son's interests and friends were becoming more heterogeneous and he was revealing a challenging attitude towards certain rules and rituals, like praying five times a day. A normal behaviour for a boy of that age, I observed. Zubida replied that she would be more comfortable with this attitude if she was still living in Morocco where, she hold, the whole environment would affect and protect her children, preventing them from embracing what she perceived as dangerous behaviour. In Italy, she seemed to imply, it is adamant for Muslims to make their difference visible to themselves and others, and the most obvious way to do this is through Islam.

My analysis of the dialogue with Zubida was that in a context of migration, the assumption of clear-cut Islamic identities involves drawing boundaries that define membership in a community of Muslims, which is both a local and a transnational, universal community. At the local level, the mosque provides a safe, social environment where to socialise children free from the risks of assimilation into the dominant culture. It is important to stress however that while a few migrants would have been committed to learning and studying Islam and to taking an active part in Islamist religious associations in their countries of origin, for some Muslims the experience of migration is determinant in their engagement with an Islamist way of life. In Italy where they fear a dissolution of their 'difference', the assumption of Islamic symbols and rituals and the socialisation of children in a characterised and defined place such as the mosque respond to the need to make this difference and identity visible before both Italian society and fellow emigrants.

However, confronted with the sophisticated and challenging nature of Said's reflections, his mother's fears need to be analysed under a more complex light. The first thing Said made me notice in the course of one of our conversations was his new stylish and

fashionable hat which, he said, ironically but proudly, made him look like an ‘anti-globalization’ activist. The hat, which he had bought in a main street shop was drew a sarcastic reaction from his mother Zubida, who was both unenthusiastic about the price, and the way in which it made Said appear too much like an Italian youth. Yet, curiously, the second thing that Said showed me was a present his mother had bought him in Mecca during her last *hajj*. This was a brand new digital quartz watch indicating the *qibla*, the correct direction Muslims have to keep while praying towards Mecca, which after inserting the geographical co-ordinates also rings at the correct praying times, allowing the travelling practising Muslim to fulfil his religious duties anywhere and at any time in the world. This, I commented with Said, was a very puzzling gadget. By contrast with the traveller of Muhammad’s times who, many claim, was exempt from praying, the cosmopolitan active Muslim can find no excuse for not complying with Islamic rituals and duties. Globalisation and technology, once again, can be tools for revitalisation, if not reinvention, of traditions.

I wanted to know Said’s ideas about the book by the philosopher and Islamic scholar, Tariq Ramadan, *To be European Muslim* (Ramadan 1998). Since I was reading it when I last met him, I was particularly interested in investigating what it meant to be a ‘European’ Muslim for young second generation Muslims, and exploring what the European component involved. I was convinced that being a *European Muslim* rather than simply a *Muslim in Europe* demanded a higher degree of negotiation and a more complex cultural and religious dynamic.

Most of our conversation concerned Said’s disagreement with the established leaders of Islamic groups and associations on what it means to be European *and* Muslim. He argued that as opposed to those European Muslims who perceive themselves as members of a

religious minority who should participate in European societies from a ‘minority standpoint’, his aim was integration with the society where he lives by way of a separation of religious, political and social discourses. This is what he meant by a ‘full secularisation’.

My aim is to normalize the presence of Muslims, but not by way of a religious contribution, but through a personal contribution. For this reason I have a lot of problems with the other Muslims. I try to compromise my identity.

This process for Said means that one could be an active, practising and committed Muslim, as he is, but also a left wing supporter. As he put it, Islam does not inform this other political identity, which is not based on a politicisation of Islam, but rather on an identification with universal values of equality and respect for the individual despite differences of religion, class, gender and ethnicity. Islam, nonetheless, is the source of another level of identification, a very strong religious one, which as a member of an unrecognised when not misrecognised religion in Europe, provides the driving force for Said’s political and public involvement as Muslim.

Said, however, explained how painful and frustrating may be this process of ‘integration’, which is first and foremost a subjective process of harmonisation of different identifications and political and religious interests.

Recently, I gave a speech as a representative of a left wing organisation (*Sinistra Giovanile*) to which I belong, in a public demonstration for peace in Palestine. I have been registered with the association for more than a year now. And yet, the person who announced me, who is a friend of mine whom I have known for a long time,

presented me as a “young immigrant” who was talking from a “different culture”. It is very difficult and painful for me.

The possibility of embodying multiple identities, a process he calls ‘compromising’, is seen as an impossible political and personal project by both mainstream Muslim leaders and by the sustainers of multiculturalism. Said himself is pulled in opposite directions which deny his plurality of positions and identifications. On the one hand, the multiculturalist rhetoric persists in perceiving him as the ‘Other’, even when he is politically and publicly speaking from a shared position, and strives to be seen as ‘one of them’ instead of aiming at expressing a ‘difference’. On the other hand, the leaders of the first generation and of the official Islamic organisations perceive him as a double-crosser, accusing him of strategically ‘using’ the visibility that his activism in the public sphere as a young and articulated second generation Muslim offers him in order to benefit causes other than Islamic one.

Beyond the ‘Minority Standpoint’: Towards a Transnational Public Sphere?

According to Said, Islam does not conflict with his other political identities and interests, for Islam is, in his own words, a ‘natural’ and ‘open’ religion which intimately suggests to the individual what is correct: ‘If you feel like doing something, it means that Islam allows you to do so’. According to some of the most prominent figures of the national leadership, however, to be a Muslim means to have Islam as a priority in life, or in the most extreme cases, to Islamicise *dâr al-harb*.

The question of alliances is crucial to Said who elaborates on it by referring to the Islamic conception of ‘*al walah wa al bari’i*’ (alliance and innocence). According to him,

Muslims are urged to decide with whom they want to make alliances and from what they want to be distinguished (or considered innocent from), and he adds:

Muslims are always afraid of engaging in alliances with Others ... They think: ‘In condemning Bin Laden, do I not run the risk of betraying my brothers? [Overcoming this] will be difficult unless they are convinced on the inside that Islam means peace, and that it is God that tells you this ... This belief would help Muslims find the right alliances. Even if they (the leadership) want to work with the society where they live, it is ultimately the fear of not being recognised and accepted within Italian society, *as* Italians, which leads them to be reluctant to give away and sacrifice their certainties, their self-confidence, with the risk of being eventually defined as someone who talks “from another culture”, as happened to me.

It is indeed at the European level, Said suggests, that Muslims are developing the most interesting and innovative practices and identities, forging a new supranational public sphere.

I personally find myself better at the European level, where I am a member of the commission for inter-religious dialogue in the FIOE. At the national level, not only in Italy, but everywhere, Muslims are in a backward position. They are usually doctors who fled from their countries and came here, but they are not intellectuals, as the people in the FIOE, the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, which is a network of organisations, the Director is originally from Libya and he is very good. At the national level, they are very sectarian, while at the European level, the leadership was able to develop several different agendas, one of which aims at putting together very diverse Muslims, from the Sufi to the followers of the Muslim

Brotherhood, which is in fact a very heterogeneous group, very misrepresented in the West ... The other agenda is that of finding resonance between elements inside the Islamic doctrine (the inside) and external elements (the outside), i.e. the social and cultural life of Muslims in Europe

Said seems to imply that this transnational public sphere that is being forged at the European level bypasses the national context with its backward and traditional ways of conceiving of Muslims' identities and alliances. Moreover, despite the more recent Muslim presence in Italy, the national leadership, according to Said, cannot be excused for expressing a retrograde outlook and political project. Those Muslims who operate at a European level are in fact producing new identities and political and cultural narratives, a new *fiqh* (jurisprudence) (see Bowen supra), which Muslims at local and national levels cannot ignore.

Today we can be very advanced, much more than France, because there is a European avant-garde providing models that are there to be followed. The historical evolution of emigration does not necessarily mean that we, in Italy, lie a step behind with respect to France, where the presence of Muslims is well-established, we do not need to attain to any stage.

The idea of a European public sphere as an avant-garde seems to be taking root among second generation Muslims, as witnessed by a key-note speech that was delivered by Zein Omar at a Femyso conference in Budapest in October 2002 in a panel on the contribution of European Muslims to issues of human rights.

The question then will be: is there a possibility of creating a universal culture of human rights as it has been the goal of the UN Declaration, with the difficulties we have in implementing these principles? My personal answer to this question is, yes! But how? With a great deal of mutual respect within the European context, and even internationally, we can achieve fantastic results in our endeavour to promote basic human rights. To understand each other better we need an open and continuous dialogue between the world religions and cultures of the world, and intercultural dialogue between the different cultures within a certain region. Europe can be a leading vanguard in this project, and all the existing factors bear witness to that.

This European level represents in Said's words the avant-garde, not only the most interesting public arena but also the source of the most progressive and challenging doctrinal trends. Together with organizations such as Femyso, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (www.ecfr.org/ in Arabic), is quoted by Said as being at the forefront of innovation, by encouraging a greater participation of women and the younger generation in the decision-making bodies. The ECFR was founded in 1997 in the UK and presented itself not in competition with the established jurisprudence bodies of the Muslim world, but rather as a complement 'aiming to contribute to a reflection of the *fiqh* of minorities' (Al Qaradawi quoted in Caeiro 2003).

The council is headed by Yussuf Al Qaradawi, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood based in Egypt which is a reference figure for European Muslims (see Bowen supra). Indeed, like Tariq Ramadan, Al Qaradawi is a supporter of the principle of the adaptability of Islam to the diverse contexts where Muslims live around the world. The influence of Al Qaradawi on European Islam bears witness to the importance in European

Islam of a wider, transnational public sphere, in turn the expression of a wider global *umma* of Muslims, of which, as Said himself underlined, European Muslims want to feel part. Although conceived as an instrument for the development of a jurisprudence for Muslim minorities in Europe, initiatives such as that of the ECFR raised contrasting reactions, ranging from the excitement of those, especially in Europe, who see in such bodies the seeds of a future Islamic reform extending to the whole of the muslim world, to those on the other side who accuse the ECFR of destabilising the unity of the community and attacking the basics of Islam (Caeiro 2003: 26). These critiques were not without effect. Although scholars and religious figures from the Muslim world were initially supposed to be a quarter of the whole body, they are now fifty percent, revealing the difficulty of imposing a European Islam, especially a *fiqh* of minorities, without a strong legitimation from the established schools of religious *fiqh* based in the Muslim world, where some of the fatwas issued in Europe, for example on mortgages and other issues, have been received with anger and criticism (Caeiro 2003).

Participation in the local public sphere

While the debates arising around different conceptualisations of transnational Islam and the tensions between the national and the transnational have been outlined above, there is yet another level that needs to be highlighted, the importance of the involvement in the local public sphere that should complement the active participation and identification in the transnational public sphere.

Said, while contributing to fostering a European Muslim identity and political sphere, judges severely those of his Muslim peers who refuse to engage politically at the local level

and operate only in a transnational almost virtual arena. Indeed, transnational political actions and identities that some second and third generation Muslims across Europe have embraced seem to give birth to a de-territorialised public sphere which not only challenges the national boundaries but transcends the local level altogether. This emerged during one conversation in which, Said, who had just returned from the international meeting of Femyso in Budapest, reported to me with surprise and fear how in the course of one conference workshop, several second or even third generation Muslims, especially British-Pakistani girls, angrily expressed their refusal of a dual or hybrid identity. They claimed, Said reported, that they wanted to represent themselves as just Muslims, part of a transnational community of Muslims, disregarding the local communities where they live their daily life. This attitude, Said pondered loudly, is revealing of a very dangerous trend, the symptom of which he defined as ‘a profound inner ambiguity’, that the second and third generation is undergoing: He gave me this specific example:

There was a girl, born and brought up in London from Pakistani parents, who teaches maths at school, who is very much involved with issues of human rights, who criticises and contests the violation of human rights in her country of origin, but she does not understand the importance of a civil involvement in the local place where she lives. She is so closed that she is not able anymore to contextualise her life, she spends all her time on the Internet, writing reports on the situation in Palestine, or in Afghanistan. It is like a virtual thing.

The local, on the other hand, assumes particular importance, for it is the arena where people’s voices and concerns could be heard and developed into new demands of citizenship and ways of belonging to the European countries where Muslims live (see Cesari 2003 on Muslim

youth in France). Tariq Ramadan too made this clear in an invited at the Femyso conference in Budapest in October 2002. European Muslims, he argued, have to develop a deep awareness that Europe is their home. Feeling at home in Europe means for Muslims that they should engage in every aspect of the political and social life that touches upon them as citizens in their local communities: education, social discrimination and the full access to social and civil rights. He then continued by asserting the need for European Muslims to

overcome their engagement in the society where they live from the unique standpoint of a minority, which is becoming a trap. Several Muslims prefer to embrace the communitarian logic, but in the long run it is a trap because it excludes Muslims from all other issues. In every country in Europe, people are not located on the basis of their religion, but on the basis of citizenship. We have to go back to the universal and overcome the individual. The 'Muslim minority' issue is becoming a trap.

Conclusions

Observers of Muslims in Europe have often contributed to reproducing a dichotomous understanding of the processes that Islam is undergoing, seen in a state of constant tension between individualisation on the one hand and communitarianisation or even radicalisation on the other (see Roy 2000; Schiffauer 1999). Other scholars have concluded that second generation Muslims are developing individual and secular forms of identification with Islam, detached from or even in conflict with that of their parents, an attitude which they share with their native Catholic peers. They argue that this reveals a profound disenchantment with universal values typical of our age.

Khosrokhavar (1998), analysing the young generation of Muslims in France, suggests three different ways they relate to Islam in their everyday life in France. For many, Islam is a tool for an integration which refuses assimilation, a way through which young Muslims try to make themselves visible as both French *and* Muslim. Islam provides this young generation with an opportunity to be French *differently*, and to do this, they need to make their difference visible in the public sphere in a positive way. But secondly, Islam can also become a way of coping with, and often reiterating or reinforcing one's exclusion from a society which has put Muslims at the margins, a society of which they do not want to be part. Thirdly, in the most extreme cases they slip into a political engagement embodied by a project of subversion or resistance tied to transnational organisations.

The emergence among second generation Muslims of so-called 'neo-communities' underlines their distinctiveness from the first generation where ethnicity and traditions imported from the countries of origin formed the basis of identification. The constitution of neo-communities provides second or third generation Muslims with a way out of the dilemma of choosing between ethnicity or integration, adaptation or innovation (Khilani 1998). Said's testimony adds complexity to this picture by revealing other possible ways in which young second generation Muslims engage with Islam in a non-Muslim society, ways which prioritise overcoming the 'minority' standpoint, and articulating the Islamic identity with universal values, rather than just claiming respect for 'difference'.

Said's reflections, like those of other Muslim intellectuals and leaders quoted in this paper, suggest that the political, social and civil engagement with the local society in Europe is a path that, although involving a high level of compromise and risk of refusal, is the only one which opens up the possibility for a new and truly plural society. Said's voice, while

marginalised at the national level, seems to find strong legitimacy and echo in the thoughts expressed by European Muslim intellectuals who are at the forefront of promoting the ideas and practices of a Euro-Islam, not detached but instead anchored in several ways to the reality of the Muslim world too.

Rather than providing a safe refuge that provides dignity against a prevailing feeling of marginalisation, Islam represents, in Said's life, one of multiple identifications. Said reconciles his quest for recognition as Muslim with an active political identification and engagement with universal values, suggesting that there is no opposition between the two. While Said himself does not see any contradiction in his attempt to harmonise his multiple loyalties and identities, his accounts reveals the familial and social tensions involved with making this multi-dimensionality visible in the public sphere. Indeed, he finds himself pulled between two different forces which try to keep his multiple and intersecting identifications and political subjectivities as separate. On the one hand, the multicultural rhetoric persists in confining him to a space of 'Otherness'; on the other, the older leadership of the official Islamic organisations urges him to devote himself and his activities to 'Islamic' causes on a national basis, pressing him to adopt a dichotomous perception of alliances and bonds, imposing in so doing the logic of the 'minority standpoint' as the only acceptable space for political and cultural action.

Said explains the nature of the tension between him and the leadership in terms of a generational conflict and in terms of his struggle against the 'backwardness' of the meanings and practices involved with being a Muslim and more specifically a European Muslim. The old leadership expresses a conservative outlook, their attitudes being partly forged and shaped by the boundaries of the nation, understood as the arena which informs and sets the

limits of the first generation's political action and ideas. Indeed, the debate briefly outlined above amongst the various official Islamic organisations in Italy bears witness to how the national space impinges upon mainstream discourses on the nature of Islam in Italy and on who should then be entitled to negotiate with the state. The nation-state logic, that understands Islam as a religion professed by a minority of its citizens, imposes the boundaries of the nation as the basis on which legitimacy can be claimed. In this context, transnational agendas and affiliations are contested as an expression of interests and identities alien and dangerous with respect to the national ones.

The national context is also the arena where factionalism operate. On the one hand there are some converts who are interested in extricating Islam from its transnational origin and current linkages, and in seeking accreditation as the most reliable representatives at the national level. On the other, the first generation of Muslims does not seem able to escape the 'minority standpoint' trap, promoted and reinforced by multiculturalism. But the national political arena is also home to the reproduction of the 'othering' and reification of Muslims, seen as permanent guests and far from being allowed full citizenship.

Indeed, I should underline that Said is in a paradoxical situation with regard to his legal situation. His family is applying for citizenship status, having resided in Italy for more than ten years, but he will be unable to receive Italian citizenship if it is granted to his family, because he had just turned eighteen years old when the request was put forward. As a university student he is now obliged to renew his resident permit every year with the fear of being sent to Morocco, to a country where, although visiting every year, he has no feeling of belonging whatsoever. It is no surprise, then, that the national arena represents for Said a space of 'backwardness', where he does not find recognition either as Muslim or as second

generation resident and where, most importantly, his multiple identities find arduous to be accepted. In this context, it is a transnational, European, arena that provides him with membership and hope for future changes. Indeed, more than an Italian Muslim, Said embodies the emergence of a post-national generation of European Muslims.

Endnotes

- (1) See, for example; his interviews on http://www.repubblica.it/online/la_vita_degli_altri/ventisettemag/ventisettemag/ventisettemag.html/, and http://www.repubblica.it/online/la_vita_degli_altri/cittadinanza/cittadinanza/cittadinanza.html/
- (2) See Lorenzo Declich, 'Tensioni all'ombra della moschea' and 'Attenti a non dividere in buoni e cattivi', *Confronti*, January 1995: 34-36.

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