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Muslims and Europe. Navigating across secular and religious fields

(Draft, please do not quote or circulate)

Ruba Salih

University of Bologna

Introduction

In recent times, discussions around the legitimacy of exhibiting religious symbols in the public spheres have gained prominence in European political and popular debates. Most of these debates seem to emphasize that the issue at stake is around the extent to which European societies should allow challenges to the allegedly secular nature of their institutions and political culture. This tension is often represented in terms of a clash between modern, secular outlooks, embodied by the histories and institutions of European nation-states, and religious or so-called “fundamentalist” groups and projects which are seen as threatening the former with their craving for recognition in the public spheres. This interpretation seems to forget the ways in which these kinds of tensions have been historically internal to both Europe and the West at large.

A glimpse into the period preceding the political constitution of the United States, for example, provides an interesting picture in this regard. These years were characterized by harsh conflicts amongst the multifarious immigrant and religious Christian communities, especially members of the Anglican Church and Catholics who had settled in the country, with the Anglicans opposing their “nativism” to the outsidership of the newly arrived migrants. Discourses that articulated the religious, cultural and linguistic differences of these (mostly European) migrants in hierarchical terms strikingly resemble contemporary discourses on immigration in Europe. In 1753 Benjamin Franklin was writing to a friend on the impossibility of assimilating the Germans who had by the time settled in Pennsylvania, complaining about the facts that the efforts of the German communities to keep their language and their culture would lead them in fact to contaminate the authentic character of the country.

Those were the years of an intense and at times violent confrontation on the place that religion, especially the Catholic one, was to occupy in the public (Protestant?) sphere. The Irish Catholics who had first settled in Maryland and who were at first tolerated, were obliged to convert to Anglicanism after the English Revolution in 1688, lost their right to vote and were confined to practice their religion in the private sphere. The aversion of the Protestant Church towards Catholic immigrants, especially Irish and Germans, continued throughout the 19th century and was particularly intense when, around the first half of the 19th century, the issue of religious teaching at school came at stake in several States. A “secular”, “objective reading of the Bible at school was proposed by the Republican current, who considered the Bible to be a text open to different interpretations and points of views. This project was firmly rejected by the Catholics who, on the other had, wanted confessional school to be financed by the State. (Lacorne, 1997)

Debates over the presence of religion in the public sphere are neither new in the West nor external to its Christian tradition. Analyses that emphasise a “secular-religious” dichotomy as a frame for understanding contemporary debates underestimate the extent to which the universalisation of the modern nation-state, (and of secularisation processes with it) has also imposed the ways through which we understand the religious and the secular. More importantly, analyses that frame contemporary debates around the place of the religious into the public sphere in terms of an opposition between Muslims and secular, western views, reinforce a Manichean approach which does not contribute to understand the complex issues at stake in contemporary Europe.

With this in mind, this paper will focus on two highly discussed events which recently received massive attention in Europe: the French law banning religious symbols in public schools and the claim for removing the crucifix in public schools in Italy, analyzing the different voices and discourses which emerged around them. By questioning the dichotomy “secular-religious” as an appropriate frame for understanding the cultural politics of and around Muslims in Europe, the paper will explore the ways in which different constituencies articulated notions of “secular” and “religious”.

This paper draws from Talal Asad’ s suggestion to shy away from the common assumption of the secular and the religious as essential and given for granted categories.

He argues: “If secularism as a doctrine requires the distinction between private reason and public principle, it also demands the placing of the religious in the former by the secular. Private *reason* is

not the same as private *space*; it is entitlement to difference, the immunity from the force of public reason. So theoretical and practical problems remain that call for each of these categories to be defined. What makes a discourse and an action “religious” or “secular”? (Asad 2003:8)

As the material below shall highlight, the question of how to distinguish between the religious and the secular or, more precisely, “between religious motives and secular motives behind certain actions” (Asad: 2003:12) is crucial and an underestimated one.

Talal Asad’s argument that there is nothing “*essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines the “sacred language” or “sacred experience”” (2003:26) seems especially relevant when analysing material from France and Italy. As the material that follow will illustrate, most of those who opposed the removal of the crucifix from the Ofena school in Italy did not hold that position simply because of the sacred character of the crucifix, but rather called for “secular” arguments on the crucifix as a symbol embodying the universal values of the “Christian civilization”, or as the Muslims did, proposed a notion of the secular, as a space of cohabitation of different religious traditions. Similarly, both those who were in favour as well as those who opposed the law banning religious symbols in French schools, deployed arguments which were based on different interpretations on the emancipating or oppressive character of the *hijab* for the Muslim girls wearing it.

I will conclude by arguing that rather than two opposite terms of a dichotomy, secular and religious terrains crosscut and variably intersect both Muslim and supposedly secular constituencies’ discourses in their search for legitimization and recognition.

Is there a Secular Europe?

As I have just mentioned, in recent times, discussions around the presence of religion in the public sphere have commonly been articulated as an opposition between Muslim values and political traditions and European ones.

However things seem much more fluid than this essentialist picture would suggest. As much literature has shown most Muslims who live in Europe are either not actively practicing religion, or

are unconcerned with it altogether. Surveys conducted in France have concluded that almost 68 per cent of Algerians declared not to have a religion. Most young of Maghrebi origin admit practices around sex, marriage and leisure which would be judged as anti-Islamic by the previous generation. (Zubaida, 2003) When it comes to the issue of the veil, research has shown that out of two millions of female students, the *hijab* concerns around one or two thousands students (Tevanian, 2004) (Zubaida, 2003).

In Italy, debates around the weak secular character of the country, and the deep influence of the Catholic Church on Italian political culture and rules, has been often at stake, not least in the course of the last few months when a heavily religiously inspired law on artificial insemination was approved raising a harsh opposition amongst liberal and feminists movements. Despite the fact that in the 1970s the political battle around the approval of the right to divorce and abortion was won, in the course of the last twenty years the Vatican has continued to be highly involved in the public and political sphere, exerting pressure on both the public opinion and the Christian oriented political parties in Parliament.

It could certainly be argued that the process of secularisation which, to a certain extent, accompanied the formation of other nation-states in Europe has never really been achieved in Italy as it is evident from the pervasive presence of Catholicism within political and civic institutions and, more generally, within the national political culture (cf. van der Veer, 1998:288). It is only quite recently, in 1984, that Italian parliament voted a new *Concordato* regulating the relations between the state and the Roman Catholic Church, which overcame the old *Concordato* dating back to 1929. The most relevant change is the stipulation that Catholicism is no longer the state religion in Italy. However, it still enjoys privileges with respect to other faiths, in particular concerning the teaching of the Catholic religion at school, the freedom of Catholic private schools, the fiscal advantages of religiously based organisations, etc. In this sense, rather than simply a “secular” State, Italy would be better defined as a state where the Catholic religion is established while other religions undergo separate agreements with the State to be recognized (Bhargava, 2003).

The strong pressure exerted by the Church in Italy is by no means an exception in the European context. The pressure of catholic groups is especially powerful in Bruxelles, at the heart of the political and administrative machine of the European Union, where several networks of organizations and associations act as catholic “think tank”. Officially these associations are constituted as spiritual centres, serving EU’s officials and politicians’ spiritual needs, but in fact

they also serve as meeting centres where politicians and officials of Catholic faith meet to exchange ideas on the political and economic problems of the EU. These organizations, directly connected to the Vatican, act in fact as real lobbies, trying to place members in strategic positions aiming at shaping the politics of the Union.

Their pressure is such that in February 2002, 53 deputies have denounced the interference of the Catholic Church on issues pertaining marriage and divorce (see Christian Terras on *Le Monde Diplomatique* 6 January 2004)

France is strictly defined and represented as a secular state. On the 23 September 1789, Clermont-Tonnere pronounced a famous discourse where the secular principles of the French republic were clearly defined: *“We have to deny everything to the Jews as a nation, and grant the Jews everything as individuals...One could argue. They do not want to be so. Well! If they do not want they should say it and we should ban them. It is repugnant the idea that within the state there could be a society of non-citizens and a nation within the nation”*. (quoted in Lacorne p.25) This Jacobin paradigm is still articulating the French political discourse¹. From within the Enlightenment tradition of universalism and equality of all citizens before the law, the French Republic has embodied the “Jacobin paradigm” of assimilation. However, a deeper analysis highlights fractures in what seems to be the linear narrative of French secularism.

As Bruno Etienne has pointed out, the non-application of the Jacobin paradigm in the French colonies is a paradigmatic example of the contradictory nature of secularism in France and is of crucial importance if we are to understand the complex nature of the relations between France and *its* Muslims.

In French Algeria, for example, the state interfered with the religious sphere by dismantling Muslim codes and by expropriating the *habous* and places of worship, redistributing them to Europeans. The 1905 law separating church from the state was never fully applied in Algeria where mosques and imams were subject to control by the French state. When in the first half of the thirties, Muslim reformists claimed their autonomy from the colonial power, the latter was hostile to this separation aiming at keeping their activities and ideologies under control. In addition, the status of Algeria, which was voted after the second world war in 1947, created a double electoral college where

¹ A similar debate developed in India in the constituent assembly that drafted the Indian secular Constitution: “in a secular state minorities based on religion or community should not be recognized”.

Algerians would constitute a specific electoral body. In complete violation of the law of the Republic, the religious criteria was introduced to legitimate different rights.

The Ofena Crucifix

On the 23 October 2003 an Italian judge, Mario Montanaro, issued a sentence ordering the removal of the crucifix from the walls of a primary school in Ofena, a small village in Abruzzo. The case was raised by an Italian Muslim convert, whose children attend the primary school, leader of a small association of Italian converts called *Associazione Musulmani Italiani*,.

The sentence based its arguments on the principle of the impartiality of public schools' institutions with respect to religious phenomena and symbols. This impartiality, it contended the ordinance, should be achieved by not allowing the exposition of religious symbols in public institutions. The judge considered the hypothesis that several religious symbols could be exposed in schools, but decided that this would threaten the freedom of those who do not have any belief. The sentence maintained that:

“...the presence of the crucifix in schools brings the pupil to a deeply wrong understanding of the cultural dimension of the faith expression, because it manifests the unequivocal will of the state... of placing the Catholic belief at the centre of the universe, as an absolute truth, without the minimum respect for other religious and cultural experiences in the historical process of the human development, totally neglecting their inevitable relations and reciprocal influence”.

It is very interesting to note that following this event in January 2004, another woman, this time of Scandinavian origin, brought to Court the issue of the removal of the crucifix from state schools. Again the Court (this time the regional *Tribunali Amministrativi Regionali*), although recognizing that the crucifix is the most important and venerated Christian icon, expressed scepticism on the compatibility of the exposition of the crucifix in public schools with the principles expressed within the Constitution, which maintains that the state should be impartial to all religious beliefs, and

referred the case to the Constitutional Court. This time, however, the case did not make any resonance and did not receive attention in the media.

Very cogently, the correspondent of Al Alhram weekly, Samia Nkrumah, summarized the debate that followed the ordinance as follow:

“The hailstorm of criticism in response to this ruling reveals the extent to which Italy, despite the advance of secularism, culturally is still a staunchly Catholic nation. Its people, even many die-hard secularists, are largely unwilling to part with their traditions, whether they have religious significance or not” (6-12 November 2003, issue n.663)

On the crucifix, the Association of Young Muslims of Italy (AGMI) issued a press release maintaining that: “the crucifix for young Italian Muslims does not represent a problem. On the contrary, it has been and it will continue to represent a stimulating symbol for reflection and dialogue based on reciprocal respect for a real peaceful coexistence”. To them, “the secularism of the public institutions should not mean the exclusion of the religious symbols, but rather their inclusion as cultural and social heritage and very useful instruments to build a multicultural society”

The Unione delle Comunità ed Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (UCOII)² interpreted negatively the ordinance fearing that the sentence could produce “perverse and undesirable effects and certainly of a negative nature, for the Christian-Muslim dialogue that we are trying to build with difficulty, and more generally for the quality of the coexistence in our country”.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the judge’s sentence claiming the removal of the crucifix, an influential member of the Northern League used a crusade language to criticize those who “accept passively those faiths that negate religious freedom and see those who believe in a *different God*, as enemies (La Repubblica, 26 Ottobre 2003) and added that “between Mohammed, religious wars, Bin Laden and co., myself and the Northern league will be always on the side of the crucifix and will fight on every front”

² The Ucoii has been at the forefront of the battle for the signing of the Intesa with the Italian state. The bulk of the rights that the Ucoii urges should be accorded to Muslims in Italy are: to celebrate the Friday prayer, the status of the Islamic guides and Imams, the recognition of the two main Islamic feasts, the right to receive religious assistance in hospitals, prisons, barracks; the right to have Islamic classes at school taught by muslim teachers, the official recognition of Islamic schools, Islamic cemeteries.

The political exploitation of the event aimed at denigrating the image of Muslims in the country as invaders was foreseen by the general secretary of the UCOII, Hamza Piccardo, who pointed to the fact that this move comes as an opportunity for those who are willing to question the possibility of a multicultural society “respectful in a secular way” of all the “religious and non religious options”. The argument brought about by Judge Montanaro for the removal of the crucifix in the primary school of Ofena, namely that the presence of the crucifix in schools’ classrooms threatened the principle of cultural and religious plurality, which can be realized only if the school institutions remain neutral to any religious phenomenon, is according to Piccardo, the same kind of “secular fundamentalism” that brought to the banning of the veil in state schools in France.

While several Muslim constituencies denounced what they called “the secular fundamentalism” of the ordinance, calling for a different notion of state secularism respectful in a non preferential way of the expression of all religions in the public sphere, one of the most important catholic bodies, the Italian Episcopal Conference, (*conferenza episcopale italiana*) put forward a rather straightforward secular argument to sustain its criticism to the ordinance, namely that the removal of the crucifix constitutes a violation of the 1923 (fascist) law that obliges all public schools and tribunals to expose it.

A third sets of arguments focused on the universal cultural values that the crucifix supposedly embody, as a legitimation of its presence in state schools and other public institutions.

To a spoke person of one the *Unione Democratici Cristiani*, the crucifix should be exposed in all schools because it is the symbol of the civic values of the country. And to a member of another political party which emerged out of the dissolution of the *Democrazia Cristiana*, the crucifix represents “the catholic values that are shared by the majority of Italian society” and reminds how his party in the past operated in a way that was “respectful of secularism” “by showing the maximum tolerance towards those who did not share our values” (*La Repubblica*, 26 Ottobre 2003)

Ciampi, the Italian president of the Republic also endorsed this outlook by maintaining that “the crucifix in schools has always been considered not only a distinctive sign of a certain religious belief, but above all a symbol of the values that are at the basis of our identity” and reminds that the secular philosopher Benedetto Croce entitled one of his writings “Why we can’t not name ourselves Christians” (*perché non possiamo non dirci cristiani*) (28 ottobre 2003).

A part from a few exceptions, (For example Franco Grillini) also left-wing constituencies were quite against the removal of the crucifix. Livia Turco, an influential left wing MP, argued that “removing the crucifix from the schools is an extreme act, which won’t help Islam to be loved by Italians, adding that “...from a secular point of view, we can not forget the history of our country and the way that the Catholic religion influences its culture and feelings”.

It is interesting to highlight that these kinds of outlooks were similarly deployed in Germany by some political leaders like Angela Merkel, leader of the CDU, who stated that “Christian symbols are part of our culture”. In Germany, this position was taken to its extreme logical consequences in some Landers where some political leaders openly propounded the idea of differentiating between the veil, as an intrinsically oppressive symbol which should not be allowed to be don in the public sphere, and the crucifix, presented as conveying different meanings and symbolizing a different tradition, which should therefore be legitimately present in the public sphere³.

In the Italian context, cultural and religious differences, evidently, serve the aim of restoring an imagined historical and cultural unity of the Italian nation, which is represented as threatened by the introduction of other, Islamic symbols or claims.

These arguments, that seemed to be ingrained in very earthly and political matters were constructed in a way that denied the tensions and fractures that characterised Italian political culture and society around the religious and the secular.

For example Italian Jews, although far from expressing a simple unanimous official position, all highlighted the political contradictions of mainstream outlooks on the issue. Some figures expressed anger towards the amnesia that characterised discourses on the civic values of Christianity.

For example, Riccardo di Segni, Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Rome, argued that the issue at stake is around the limits to pose to “the wish of a fundamental component of society to impose the sign of their faith in the house of everybody”. But he also added: “It is true that the crucifix is a cultural sign, but this is not the real reason why it is exposed in school institutions. The reason has to do with the fact that the crucifix is a religious symbol and the problem is essentially

³ Gerard Schroder apparently endorsed a “third” position, differentiating public officials and teachers who should ideally avoid wearing a veil in the course of their functions, from young students who should be free to express themselves.

religious”. However, as the following quotation suggests, it is the interpretation of the symbol itself that makes its presence in state schools intolerable to a part of the Jewish community.

“Catholics claim with legitimate proud that this is a sign of love and hope...but seen from other perspectives, like the Jewish one, the meaning of that sign is different...to us it is also he terrible reminder of a religion that in the name of that symbol, brandished as a gun, has persecuted, marginalized and humiliated our and other peoples, trying to impose that symbol as the only possible and legitimate faith...”

An influential magazine, voice of the Jewish community of Turin, contained also other types of reflections, this time more concerned with the notion of secularism and the practices it authorises. Similarly to some of the Muslim positions, who envisage a multicultural and “secular” society where all religions could be expressed in the public sphere, an editorial wrote by Anna Segre was concerned with a kind of fundamental secularism that tries to impose on other an absolute and universal truth.

According to this position, banning the expression of different traditions in the public sphere means to give for granted that there exists a secular modern European culture that is superior to all other cultures and that it should be imposed by force. “We forget”, it was argued in the article, “that this secular culture is not a divine revelation, but it emerged out of the encounter and confrontation of the diverse identities and traditions that have inhabited the continent...it frightens me the idea of having to choose between the European identity and the Jewish one...it frightens me the idea of state schools not as spaces of dialogue but of imposition of a State identity, so called secular, but in fact more constraining than the fundamentalism that it aims at fighting against”

Although deploying similar arguments, i.e. the contribution of different religions and traditions in forging Europe as a “secular” space, this position differentiates itself from that contained in the Ofena ordinance in the solution it envisages: rather than the banning of all symbols, the call here is for the free expression of religious diversity in the public sphere.

This interesting position is by no means exhaustive of the varieties of discourses and conceptions of the secular that emerged around the crucifix event. A third position endorsed by other prominent members of the Jewish community, maintained that their resentment was not against the crucifix as a symbol, but against the State that, by imposing the crucifix, violates the Constitutional principles of secularism and equality.

A peculiar argument was brought about the association Italia Laica (Secular Italy) which reacted positively to the sentence, but regretted the fact that the principle of secularism was urged to be respected “not so much in the name of basic and universalistic liberal principles of equality and religious liberty, but to avoid hurting the sentiments of the most fundamentalist amongst the makers of the new forms of religious totalitarianism...”

“Enlightened ” exclusion?

On the 3rd July 2003 the “Stasi commission” (after the name of Bernanrd Stasi, head of the commission) was formed by President Chirac to study the application of the principle of “laïcité” in all public institutions. A report was handed in on the 11th of December suggesting the drafting of a new law on secularism banning religious symbols in public institutions such as schools and tribunals.

According to Henri Pena-Ruiz, one of the member of the Stasi Commission, the role of secular law is that of favouring the common good by drawing away human relationship from the multifarious empire of force. (Le Monde Diplomatique, February 2004). Secularism, he adds, has never been an enemy of religions, as long as these do not claim any place in the public sphere.

In his opinion the public sphere, common to all, should be saved from the dangers of an “open secularism”, which in the last ten years has only brought to fragmentation and communitarianism. He denounces the dangers of the several variations of secularism, while supporting the idea that secularism does not need any adjective. The School, Pena-Ruiz carries on, is one of the last few places where what unites people is placed above what divides them. Moreover, the school, because of its role and function, can not tolerate the same regime of freedom that can be found in the street... Tomorrow, thousands of women will be grateful to the Republic for having allowed them to go to school unveiled and to sit side by side with their male fellows, on an equal basis”, and he carries on:

“Now, more than ever it would be worthy to simultaneously reactivate the authentic levers of human emancipation: social and political mobilization against all capitalistic deregulations... so that an *enlightened* consciousness...let people resist any forms of ideological fatalism... so that they could reach an authentic ethical autonomy...”

This kind of attitude and representation, which discloses an idea of the absolute Truth more distinctive of religious dogmas than of liberal thought, was highly contested as patronizing by several Muslim and non-Muslim observers. Not only the idea of “unveiling” the oppressed Muslim woman strikingly recalls the colonial discourse⁴, but also the affirmation that the *hijab* makes women invisible was strongly opposed by several women who argued that what makes them visible in European societies is precisely the *hijab*. By banning the *hijab* from schools, it was argued, the Republic aims at making Muslim women invisible.

The idea of a law banning the *hijab* at school was contested by most Muslims in France, not so much because of their inherent opposition to secularism, but rather the opposite, namely because the law was received as furthering their social exclusion, by marginalizing their role in the making of a different France.

Amongst Muslim constituencies that opposed the law but not secularism in itself, was for example Tariq Ramadan. In an open letter to Sarkozy that started provocatively with this sentence: “...Muslims who are making and will make France are not anymore notables to buy or natives to educate” he argued that European Muslims have by now understood that respecting secular law does not prevent them from practicing their religion. On the contrary, secularism grants them freedom of consciousness and faith, instead of opposing Muslims in their religious practice. The banning of religious symbols comes as a surprise when, the Conseil d’Etat had in the past maintained that school students wearing the *hijab* are not in contrast with the secular principles of the Republic.

Indeed, although the law was officially addressed to all faiths, their proponents clearly had Muslim girls wearing *hijabs* at school in mind, as it is evident also from Pina-Henri’s above quotation. This was also one of the reasons why the debate that the law triggered off in the country came to be wrongly represented as an opposition between secular constituencies and imperatives and Islamic

⁴ By the beginning of the twentieth century, the intensification of the colonial domination and the adoption by the local upper-classes and intellectual Europeanised élites of the colonial narrative and construction of their societies as backward and traditional (one famous example is the book of Qasim Amin *Tahrir el Mar'a*, The Liberation of Women, published in 1899), mark the emergence of a new type of discourse within the colonised societies. Since then, the colonised internalised the Western discourse of modernity, which rhetoric insisted specifically on women's roles. Indeed, the veil and women's status became the emblem of backwardness and tradition for the middle and upper classes and of cultural authenticity and resistance to Western domination for other segments of the population. As Leila Ahmed has shown “...it is Western discourse that in the first place determined the new meanings of the veil and gave rise to its emergence as a symbol of resistance...The resistance narrative contested the colonial thesis by inverting it-thereby also, ironically, grounding itself in the premises of the colonial thesis”(1992:162-166).

ones. However this is not an accurate representation. Critics to the ban came from “secular” as well as Islamic constituencies alike and often in the name of “secular” ideals that were opposed to the exclusionary logic intrinsic in the law.

According to Pierre Tevanian, for example, the law comes as a burst to the traditional meaning and application of secular principles of the Republic, which, he argued, in its original intentions, were supposed to refer to school curricula, teachers and school institutions, and not to pupils.

Several feminist groups also opposed the law, claiming that the expulsion of the girls would bring to their further isolation. To the proponents of this position, the universal principle of secularism is not in question. The issue at stake is around what are the best means to bring these girls to free themselves, and their exclusion from the public school is seen as the worst option, as an antifeminist and an anti social measure. Another argument brought about by those who criticized the law was around the assumption that the veil is by nature oppressive.

Some feminist groups, for example, brought forward one classical argument of Muslim feminist, suggesting that by wearing the *hijab* some women may be actually able to exit their social milieu and gain freedom and emancipation.

Interestingly, endorsing a radically different perspective on the issue was the Sheikh of Al Azhar Mohammed Sayed Tantawi who considered the French law on secularism a legitimate and therefore acceptable achievement, maintaining that Muslims should respect the laws of the non-Muslim countries where they live. Sheikh Tantawi’s position was however far from representing the whole of the Muslim world, and was promptly rebutted by other prominent members of Al-Azhar.

Some observers noted at the time that Tantawi’s declarations were not simply expressing a “religious” opinion but were rather urged by President Mubarak’s will to disseminate an image of Egypt as a secular society, especially since Sarkozy, the French Prime minister, was visiting the country at the time.⁵

Conclusions

It has become very common, especially but in no way exclusively, after the 11th of September to represent the world in Manichean terms as composed of different civilizations. Indeed, by and large,

⁵ Anna Maria Merlo “Il Cairo in Piazza contro Chirac” Il Manifesto 3 Gennaio 2004

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, therefore anti-secular 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’.

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).

Indeed, Europe has been constructed in terms of a ‘civilizational identity’ to use Talal Asad definition, where European History is also the narration of an identity, that of European civilization, that seeks to represent itself in terms of homogeneous space and time. Europeans share this civilizational essence, which is constructed in terms of a process of productive elaboration of ideas and techniques that were imported from outside. Medieval Spain, as well as European Jews up until the Second World War were totally marginal to this construction. In this sense, Asad argues that in theory it is impossible to be both Muslims and European.

In my paper I have tried to show that the secular and the religious are not antithetical spaces, nor homogeneous and linear categories or discourses. France, where the Jacobin tradition has brought to a secular constitution, has however diverted from its secular discipline in the colonies. In Italy, most outlooks contend that Christian symbols embody universal, I would say “secular” values, supposedly shared by all. At the same time, the presence of the crucifix in state school is understood by those who oppose its presence not so much as a religious symbol in a public space, but as the imposition of a dominant culture and its values on all.

Similarly, the debate above mentioned on the veil banning religious symbols from public spaces in the name of secularism and equality has not opposed holistic secular outlooks to religious constituencies and worldviews. Rather, secularists were divided on the best way to achieve values intrinsic to secularism, which comprise free access to citizenship and equality of access to resources. To some observers, in fact, this aim can not be reached by excluding girls wearing the Hijab, but rather by allowing them to don it in the name of the freedom of expression, and also because by excluding them the principle of equality of access will be compromised. However, most discourses focused on the “secular” issue of whether the hijab is oppressive or rather emancipating for the women wearing it. Those who viewed favourably the banning of the veil (like members of the Stasi commission) thought that the public space can not be intruded by religious symbols, not so much in the name of an abstract principle, but because the symbols in question are seen by nature as oppressive (see Pina-Herni)

If we agree with Talal Asad that the religious and the secular are not essentially fixed categories, then we can begin to see through the analysis of these two events how it is always political discourses and institutions that more or less authoritatively decide what belongs to “private and religious reason” and what to “a political ethic independent of religious belief” (Asad 2003)

Indeed, it was on this basis that the French Conseil d’Etat called for the reinsertion of the Muslim girls who, in the late eighties, during the event that came to be globally known as “l’affaire du foulard”, were expelled from state schools because they refused to take off their hijab. According to a consultant of the Conseil d’Etat at the time, Mr.Kessler, “to wear a veil in a public school certainly means to bring the private into the public space, but in so far as this expression is not by nature aggressive or aiming at proselytising, it is still part of the private and the state should not oppose this practice in the name of a rule that it would create by interpreting the practice” (cit. in Denis Lacorne p.29)⁶.

⁶ Denise Lacorne, *La crisi dell’identità Americana. Dal melting pot al multiculturalismo*. Editori Riuniti 1999