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Globalised Islam
The Search for a New Ummah

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[...] The blurring of the borders between Islam and the West is not just a consequence of immigration. It is linked with a more general phenomenon: deterritorialisation. Islam is less and less ascribed to a specific territory and civilisational area. This is visible also in the slow integration of Eastern Europe into Western Europe, and in Turkey's candidacy for EU membership. The evolution of Eastern Europe has, of course, more to do with the collapse of the communist empire than with the expansion of Islam, but one consequence is that Europe has rediscovered that there are European Muslim countries (Albania, Bosnia and, tomorrow, Kosovo). Contrary to what has been more or less openly advocated by many conservative Europeans, Europe, after some hesitation, chose not to side with 'Christians' against 'Muslims', whatever the real motivations for the strategic choice of supporting the Bosnians and the Kosovars.

The deterritorialisation of Islam is also a result of globalisation and has nothing to do with Islam as such, even if it concerns millions of Muslims. But through the increase in migratory and population flows, more and more Muslims are living in societies that are not Muslim: a third of the world's Muslims now live as members of a minority. While old minorities had time to build their own culture or to share the dominant culture (Tatars, Indian Muslims, China's Hui), Muslims in recently settled minorities have to reinvent what makes them Muslim, in the sense that the common defining factor of this population as Muslim is the mere reference to Islam, with no common cultural or linguistic heritage.

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Moreover, a Muslim might experience this deterritorialisation without leaving his own country. The sense of belonging to a minority has been exacerbated by the 'westernisation', or at least globalisation, of the traditional Muslim world, to the extent that many practising Muslims consider Islam to have been 'minoritised' in the Muslim world too (in Turkey, for example). While many Muslims live in a demographic minority, many others (including, of course, the more conservative or radical Muslims) feel themselves to be a minority in their own Muslim country. The Muslim *ummah* (or community) no longer has anything to do with a territorial entity. It has to be thought of in abstract or imaginary terms.

The frontier between Islam and the West is no longer geographical, and is less and less civilisational. The process of westernisation of Muslim societies over two centuries has had obvious and permanent effects, even if it has entailed a backlash in the past thirty years, taking the form of 'Islamic revival' at different levels (political with the Iranian revolution, societal with the re-Islamisation of daily life, the increase in the number of veiled women or of references to *sharia* in the law, and so on). This backlash does not mean a return to a 'premodern' society nor to an authenticity that is supposed to have been destroyed by acculturation. It is more an attempt to 'Islamise modernity', as Sheikh Yassin wrote. Academic literature on the 'modernity' of Islamisation is abundant, even if it opposes a popular view among Western media and public opinion. Modernisation and re-Islamisation are, of course, rather problematic concepts. Islamisation might be both a reaction against and a factor of modernization (which is the case with the Islamic revolution in Iran), in the sense that the dominant perception of what modernization meant in the 1960s and 1970s was rather ethnocentric and linear (from religious tradition to secular modernity). But the issue of cultural and social change no longer rests on a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, religion and secularization, or even between liberalism and fundamentalism. We shall see, for example, how neofundamentalism is an agent of acculturation and not a return to a lost authenticity. In short, the confrontation between Islam and the West is cast in Western categories. The illusion held by the Islamic radicals is that they represent tradition, when in fact they express a negative form of westernisation.

At a time when the territorial borders between the great civilisations are fading away, mental borders are being reinvented to give a second life to the ghosts of lost civilisations: multiculturalism, minority groups, clash or dialogue of civilisations, *communautarisation* (communitarisation), and so on. Ethnicity and religion are being marshalled to draw new borders between groups whose identity relies on a performative definition: we are what we say we are, or what others say we are. These new ethnic and religious borders do not correspond to any geographical territory or area. They work in minds, attitudes and discourses. They are more vocal than territorial, but all the more eagerly endorsed and defended because they have to be invented, and because they remain fragile and transitory. Deterritorialisation of Islam leads to a quest for definition, because Islam is no longer embedded in territorial cultures, whatever their diversity – which, incidentally, is always experienced from outside. For example, an Afghan Muslim living in Afghanistan does not understand his religion as being 'Afghan', at least so long he is not challenged by an Arab Wahhabi who blames him for having blended Islam with Afghan traditions. Diversity is not an argument for tolerance whenever it is not experienced as a value.

Such westernisation is not necessarily perceived as a trauma by the 'Muslim in the street'. The challenge of westernisation is clearly understood, but is experienced in practical terms without drama and trauma by the majority of Muslims, either in Muslim countries or in the West. Although there is a long tradition of exegesis and *fatwa* on what a Muslim should or should not do when confronted with a non-Muslim environment and practices, most Muslims find a way to deal with that without contacting fatwa-online.com. We must return to the discourses and practices of the actual actors, without lingering over the theological issues of such cohabitation. Makeshift compromises, personal construction of attitudes, casual use of various levels of self-identity, *ad hoc* quotations from Hadith or the Koran, dogmatic or liberal *post hoc* rationalisation to answer unsolicited inquiries from the non-Muslim colleague or sociologist doing fieldwork – the range of attitudes is very wide and flexible. To be a Muslim in the West is not a schizophrenic experience. Clear-cut categories (like Islamist or neofundamentalist) are useful but cannot pretend to subsume the real life of millions of people, even if these terms are heuristically relevant. [...]

The common point between all fundamentalist and Islamist movements is that they draw a line inside the Muslim world between what is Islamic and what is not. A 'Muslim' society, in the cultural and sociological sense, is not for them an 'Islamic' society *per se* (that is, it is not a society based on the principles of Islam). And the need to formulate what it means to be a Muslim, to define objectively what Islam is – in short, to 'objectify' Islam – is a logical consequence of the end of the social authority of religion, due to westernisation and globalisation.

Re-Islamisation is part of a process of deculturation (that is, of a crisis of pristine cultures giving way to westernisation and reconstructed identities). Of course, I do not believe that such 'pristine' cultures were static and immune from global influence. When speaking of pristine culture, we refer more to what is reconstructed by first-generation immigrants as their own past, and to what is called 'traditional' by most Western actors dealing with immigration, including social workers and anthropologists, but also lawyers when they have to explain specific sociological practices (like arranged marriages) or defend certain customs (like female circumcision or honour crimes) in courts. References to 'tradition' by community leaders in the West or politicians from the country of origin serve as a means of maintaining a link between immigrants and the 'home' country, which could function as a political lever in the host country, as a channel for funds in both directions, or as a basis for business relationships. Youngsters who argue with their parents (or grandparents) about speaking English, wearing Western-style clothes, dating and dancing are confronted with an image of a pristine culture, even if anthropologists know well that such an encapsulated culture never existed (and is actually transformed by the debate). Reference to tradition also has a performative function: tradition is what I call (or, more exactly, what my grandfather calls) tradition.

The relationship between Western Muslims and Muslim countries is no longer diasporic. Syrians or Yemenis in the United States feel above all that they are Arab-Americans. The link is no longer one between a diaspora and a host country, but between immigrants and new sets of identities, most of them being provided by the host country. *Maghrébin* and *beur* in France do not correspond to pristine identities (in North Africa, or the Maghreb, one is first an Algerian or a Tunisian, second an Arab,

but never a *maghrébin*). Of course some groups retain longer than others a diasporic dimension, enhanced by arranged and often endogamous marriages with a spouse from the village of origin (for example, Anatolian Turks in Europe, or Sylheti Bengalis in Britain). But among Islamic activists in Europe a trend favours a new sort of Muslim identity detached from pristine cultural links. As we shall see below, a good example of this phenomenon is the growing gap between the Turkish heirs of the Refah Partisi and the Milli Görüs movement, which was initially the European section of the Refah party but has over time become an autonomous religious movement in a purely European context. The quest for authenticity is no longer a quest to maintain a pristine identity, but to go back to and beyond this pristine identity through an ahistorical model of Islam. It is not a matter of nostalgia for a given country, for one's youth or for one's family roots. In this sense westernisation means something other than becoming Western, hence the ambivalent attitude towards it.

How do we reconcile manifesting hatred for the West with the queues for visas outside Western consulates? It is not a contradiction, even if it is often the same people who do both. And we would be mistaken to take the aspiration of Iranian youths for democracy as an invitation for a US military intervention to topple the conservative regime in Tehran. The confrontation with the Western model is a call for another kind of globalisation, expressed in Western terms such as culture, minority rights, Third World and South (developing world). The quest for authenticity is expressed against the culture of origin and Western culture, but by referring indifferently to traditional (*ummah*) or Western (anti-imperialist) categories. There is a constant struggle among many Islamic intellectuals and Third Worldist authors to historicise Western culture in order to debunk its claim to be universal, specifically of course in the field of human rights. But the critique of Western cultural hegemony is not necessarily sustained by a valorisation of existing traditional cultures, but more often by modern reconstructions of new identities, even if they resort to historical themes (for example, Confucian values in China and Singapore). Westernisation, migration and uprooting go hand in hand with the quest for another universality.

Re-Islamisation is part of this process of acculturation, rather than being a reaction against it. It is a way of appropriating this process, of experiencing it in terms of self-affirmation, but also of instrumentalising it to 'purify' Islam. Re-Islamisation means that Muslim identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context. The construction of a 'deculturalised' Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture. The issue is one not only of recasting an Islamic identity, but also of formulating it in explicit terms. Resorting to an explicit formulation is important, because it obliges one to make choices and to disentangle the different and often contradictory levels of practices and discourses where a religion is embedded in a given culture. Especially in times of political crisis (such as 9/11), ordinary Muslims feel compelled (or are explicitly asked) to explain what it means to be a Muslim (by an opinion poll, a neighbour, a news anchorman or spontaneously, because Muslims anticipate the question). The Western press publishes many opinion pieces and other articles, written by 'moderate' or 'liberal' Muslims, stating what Islam is or is not (usually what it is not: radical, violent,

fanatical, and so on). This task falls on the shoulders of every Muslim, rather than on legitimate religious authorities, simply because, as we shall see, there are so few or no established Muslim authorities in the West. Each Muslim is accountable for being a Muslim, which offers researchers an interesting opportunity. Instead of trying to penetrate a closed and intimate milieu in order to understand what people think, they are deluged with declarations and statements. To publicly state self-identity has become almost a civic duty for Muslims.

But this objectification of Islam is not only a result of political pressure and events: it is also a mechanical consequence of the delinking of religion and culture. Globalisation has blurred the connection between a religion, a pristine culture, a specific society and a territory. The social authority of religion has disappeared, specifically but not solely, through the experience of being a Muslim in the West. What is nowadays perceived as a pervasive movement of re-Islamisation or Islamic revivalism has been explained in terms of identity protest or as a way to reconcile modernity, self-affirmation and authenticity (as has been said, for example, of the return of the *hijab* among Western-educated women). True enough, but it is also a consequence of the need explicitly to formulate what Islam means for the individual (rather than what it is) when meaning is no longer sustained by social authority. Explicit elaboration also entails a projection into the future, a wish to realise the *ummah* beyond the heterogeneity of societies and cultures.

This leads to the endeavour to define a 'universal' Islam, valid in any cultural context. Of course, by definition Islam is universal, but after the time of the Prophet and his companions (the Salaf) it has always been embedded in given cultures. These cultures seem now a mere product of history and the results of many influences and idiosyncrasies. For fundamentalists (and also for some liberals) there is nothing in these cultures to be proud of, because they have altered the pristine message of Islam. Globalisation is a good opportunity to dissociate Islam from any given culture and to provide a model that could work beyond any culture. [...]

The failure of political Islam means that politics prevail over religion, as is obvious in Iran. The utopian Islamic state has faded away in favour either of practical politics or of another utopia, the *ummah*. Daily politics, political management of issues linked to religion (*sharia*), concrete economic and social challenges, strategic constraints, personal rivalries and corruption, not to mention senseless violence (for example, in Algeria) led to the desacralisation of politics, however Islamic. On the other hand, Islamisation of society led to the Islamisation of secular activities and motivations, which remain secular in essence: business, strategies of social advancement, and entertainment (like the five-star Islamic resorts in Turkey, where the real issue is fun and entertainment, not Islam). When everything has to be Islamic, nothing is.

A final paradox is that the reformulation of Islam as a mere religion is carried out not only by believers who want to secularise their religion (that is, moderate or liberal Muslims), but also by the very ones who deny any delinking of religion, state and society. To be provocative, I would say that the in-depth secularisation of Islam is being achieved by people who are denying the very concept of secularism. 'Secular' Muslims are not the actors of secularisation, because they are not involved in the process of formulating religiosity or shaping the community. The real secularists are the Islamists and neofundamentalists, because they want to bridge the gap between

religion and a secularised society by exacerbating the religious dimension, overstretching it to the extent that it cannot become a habitus by being embedded in a real culture. This overstretching of religion, after a period of paroxysmal parousia (for example, the Islamic revolution of Iran, or any given *jihad*), necessarily leads to a new schism: politics is the ultimate dimension of any religious state, and the death of any *jihad* waged out of a concrete strategy, nation or social fabric. What resurfaces is politics, as in the case of Iran, but also religion as a multifaceted practice, hence the heterogeneous dimension of Islamic revivalism. Redefining Islam as a 'pure' religion turns it into a mere religion and leaves politics to work alone.

Islam is experiencing secularisation, but in the name of fundamentalism. It is a bit confusing for everybody, which is quite logical so far as a religion is concerned and so long as God will let humans speak on His behalf. Secularisation is the unexpected but logical destiny of any mediator of a religious fundamentalism that happens to be taken seriously by a whole nation and society, from Martin Luther to Ruhollah Khomeini. [...]