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Is There a Space for European Muslims?

This study has attempted to shed some light in a subject that, although central in European public debate, has customarily been approached in a rather emotionally charged way. Muslim lives in Europe have become the object of public concern and scrutiny, Muslim cultures have been shunned upon and most attempts to articulate a legitimate and audible Muslim voice have been frustrated. Living in a continent whose self-definition has, for just under a millennium, been constructed in opposition to Islam (Delanty 1995; Neumann 1999; Said 1978), in the midst of societies that have painstakingly strived to expunge the memory of their encounters and cultural exchanges with the world of Islam, having to navigate through a treacherous landscape shaped, not only by a long and overwhelming Orientalist tradition that has traditionally viewed Muslims as bearers of an impossible cultural baggage of belatedness and barbarism but also by more recent processes of securitization and criminalization, European Muslims have found themselves in an unenviable position.

Already by the late 1980s immigration had become a potent element of the public debate with particular political forces mobilizing it as a means of gaining legitimacy and political capital (Mény and Surel 2002), especially as they targeted Muslim migrants and stressed the alleged incompatibility of Islam with European culture. This fusion of far right populism and islamophobia was so successful that it has informed public debate since then and has rendered discussions of immigration and the failure of multiculturalism inseparable from questioning the place of Islam and Muslims in Europe. As
the debate was cast in highly polarized terms, European Muslims found themselves in the unenviable position of having to confront an onslaught against them. The September 11 attacks against the United States rendered Islam and European Muslim communities ‘acceptable’ targets of scrutiny, criticism and often aggression and violence.

As we have tried to demonstrate, European Muslims have had to come to terms with this increasingly inimical environment and develop appropriate responses to their perceived, symbolic and often physical, marginalization. We have stressed that although there is evidence pointing to European Muslims experiencing increasing discrimination and prejudice (Open Society Institute 2010), this has been uneven throughout Europe. In this book we have focused on the perception of rather the actual and often quantifiable marginalization of European Muslims as it is the latter rather that provides the background which identity and social action are built upon. Within a highly polarized sociocultural context, Muslims in Europe have formed over time particular perceptions of themselves and of their place in European societies.

As Cesari (2008) points out, this perception of marginalization and of aporia has a number of potential consequences. Although her classification of the options available to European Muslims constitutes an analytical tool as reality on the ground is much more complex and nuanced, it can, nevertheless, serve as a useful starting point for the examination of the politics of identity underlying the formation of what we have called a European Muslim identity:

[I]n such a situation, in which the relationship between dominator and dominated has had such vast consequences, three modes of integration are possible for Muslims: acceptance, avoidance, or resistance . . . . These three modes underlie all the possible types of Islamic discourse and activity, both within the Muslim community and in relation to the non-Muslim world 2008: 156.

Acceptance entails the adoption of the dominant discourse of the ‘host’ cultures, combined with a process of forgetting or repressing any markers of difference. Many of our interviewees, especially those from France, recognize elements of this strategy in the way older generations tried to ‘fit in’, to ‘become invisible’ or to ‘leave who they are behind’. This seems to be understandable yet a no longer