Contested Spaces, Common Ground

Space and Power Structures in Contemporary
Multireligious Societies

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Between Fear, Freedom, and Control: Islam and the Construction of a Modern European Identity

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Introduction

The growing presence and impact of Muslims in Europe appears to be constantly problematic. A few years ago, 'Islam' was used in many European political discourses to indicate the opposite of Western values such as freedom, individual choice, and emancipation. It was taken as a "homogeneous, zombie-like body, incapable of independent thought" (Morey and Yaqin 2011: 1). Current discourses on Islam, however, seem to dig deeper into the cultural European ground addressing ritual slaughter, the legality of civil servants wearing headscarves, and the legitimacy of sharia courts, which are taken as Islamic identity markers that show the incommensurability of different cultures.

Although discourses on Islam in Europe do indeed seem to be changing on the one hand, parallel to a growing settlement of Muslims in the spatial practices of European intellectual and cultural debates, they also contain a fascinating consistent pattern on the other. Though populist Islam-bashing in modern European countries may look excessive and exaggerated and arguing against Islamic authority in public spaces may sound modern and secular, its arsenal of critique is embedded in age-old Christian traditions. Not only is this arsenal old, the very function of the critique of Islam is old as well. In this paper I will not focus on Islam-bashing as such nor on the dynamics of contrasting Islamic authority with the secular state and civil responsibilities (although these dynamics indeed do play a role in the argument) but address the *function* the critique of Islam has in constituting a serious consistent European identity. I will show, specifically, that this 'function' is not a recent one that developed in secular contexts but goes back many centuries, to the very beginning of Europe as a political-religious construct. In the fifteenth century, the transformative time of the Renaissance, the barbaric elements that Europe wanted to get rid of were projected onto 'Islam,' especially the prophet of Islam, by the head of the Roman Church, Pope Pius II. While Pius' assessment of Muhammad is highly similar to modern, secular assessments of the prophet by right-wing politicians and liberals, the question raised in this paper is not so much *what* Islam is all about in the eyes of its antagonists but rather *why* Islam is portrayed

the way it is and what this portrayal can tell us about those behind it. I will take my examples mainly from the Dutch context.

I will argue first of all that throughout the centuries European discourses on Islam were never about Islam as a different religion but always about Islam as the other side of specific European self-perspectives. While this perspective was 'Christian' at the time of the European Renaissance, it is 'secular' at the present time. The role of Islam at present, however, does not greatly differ from its earlier role in the fifteenth century. This role can best be described as an affirmative role over against the imaginative arsenal that defined and still defines the power constructions of 'Christianity' or, at the present time but at a similar level, of the 'secular state.'

To develop my argument, I will use Charles Taylor's theory on social imaginaries and Zygmunt Bauman's theory on modernity. Taylor's theory is helpful for my argument that discourses on Islam are not about Islam but about certain constructions of a European Christian or democratic 'self.' With Bauman's perspective on modernity I will argue that Islam as the historical other side of this European self-perspective fulfills the important role of constructive modern self-affirmation. After discussing and applying Taylor's and Bauman's theories, I will make a historical excursion in which I will argue that the construction of 'Europe' *as* a Taylorian imaginary, or at least as a performative indication of such an imaginary, can be linked thematically to Renaissance perspectives on Islam.

Social Imaginaries

A social imaginary, Charles Taylor argues, 'is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (Taylor 2002: 91). One of the most dominant imaginaries, Taylor argues, is the Western construct of the self, translated into all kinds of individual freedoms and perspectives on "the good" (Taylor 1989: 3). Because individuality is not an isolated stance but constantly relates to the social and to what is "good," the question of how to "force the individual into some kind of social order" and how to "make him or her conform and obey its rules" (Taylor 2002: 99) is an almost obsessive question in modern liberal democracies. The social imaginary consists of relational concerns, such as the question how we "fit together with others" or how things are going on between us and our fellows. It is, Taylor argues, about expectations "that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2002: 106). This is problematic because these notions and images underlying common expectations seem to be

the construction and use of language that safeguards the social imaginary not only of how we "fit with others" but—more importantly—how 'others' fit with 'us.' 'Normal' expectations that create common understanding are constantly liable to practices of normalization and discursive efforts. This is why normalization processes work by appealing to 'us' as democratic and tolerant people (Van Liere 2014). These normal expectations fit with the construction of the self. In times of uncertainty or crisis, however, these expectations may be frustrated, and the conception of the self as an independent and free subject may become fragile. In a situation like that, the normalization processes that Taylor speaks about can become more intense, creating discourses in which the fragile, free self is affirmed especially by resisting the image of what does not belong to this self in the alien other, i.e., the Muslim self.

On Modernity

In Taylor's view, 'modernity' can be interpreted as a background against which the self can consider its choices and views as important. It reflects the self-perspectives of the emerging self or subject as a self-governing project in the free market, while, on the other hand, it increases production and consumption, segments the sciences and domains of knowledge and—most importantly—increases the social organization of the people. This last element of modernity seems to contradict the free self. While fragmentization, individualization, and progression is culturally and economically stressed, social control, on the other hand, is extended, and the free self continually redefined within the boundaries of security and nationalities. Modern social control entails detailed knowledge about individuals living in modern societies, while individuals that only have their 'selves' and the narratives about themselves frustrate this body of knowledge: refugees without passports (nationalities) are detained. Although freedom and self-government are celebrated as fundamental Western liberties, social state control has never been as strong in history as it is now.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that what we call modernity was, as a matter of fact, in earlier times not a state of affairs but rather a process based on certain ideological presumptions like progression, rationality, and emancipation. Modernity was a "project" that was focused on the remaking of the world to the "measure of human needs and capacities" (Bauman 1995: 3). This 'remake' presupposes a rationally conceived design in which no space was left for some human traits like guilt, which were taken out of the ecclesiastical hamartialogy (where guilt was labeled as 'sin') and eliminated from choice to underline in double bold the freedom of the modern subject (Bauman

1995: 4–5). Bauman, who is deeply inspired by T.W. Adorno's negative dialec-
tics (Adorno 1990) and the meditations that Adorno wrote together with Max
Horkheimer on the dialectics of the Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno
1987), argues that, despite the ideological emphasis on the modern subject's
freedom, modernity has dialectically turned into its own denial. Modernity has
become an ordering activity that did not stop by remaking the world and free-
ing modern subjects from guilt but turned into a fluid modernity that melted
the solids of the human bonds that

> interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions—the
> patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually
> conducted life-policies on the one hand and political action of human
> collectivities on the other.
>
> BAUMAN 2000: 6

This is what Bauman calls "liquid modernity," a modernity that seems to stress
free choice on the one hand but flows into all domains of social activities and
limits human freedoms on the other. This liquidity of modernity creates new
uncertainties (because the old(er) certainties have melted away), new fears,
and diseases. Globalization, liquid relationships, economic crises, and job-
hopping mentalities make the world an uncertain place, while, on the other
hand, modern subjectivity is affirmed as independent and responsible for its
own development.

In the context of Bauman's fluid modernity, in which the connection and
communication between individual life policies and collective politics is
broken, the responses to the appearance of Islamic immigrants in European
countries is striking. While immigrants may be seen as cheap labor in the labor
market, which answers the liquid fear of losing economic positions in times
of globalization, populist responses to Islamic presences avail themselves of
the melting tools of modernity: emancipation, progression, and rationality.
Islam is portrayed as an irrational, non-emancipated, anti-progressive counter-
ideology to the values of modern democratic societies. It represents the pre-
modern chaos that justified the tight control of modernity's tools: Muslim
subjects must be liberated from Islam and become free subjects in the free
market. Presenting Islam as chaotic, unemancipated, and uncivilized rouses
the old modern political passion to control, which is the basic tenet of 'moder-
nity.' Since modernity is—in Bauman's words—an "ordering activity," Islam is
its challenge. It must be humanized, taught, and changed. In the sphere of the
social imaginary of the individual free self, Islam is characterized as a darken-
ing ideology that strips the individual of his modern features: rational thinking

and free choice. Spatial practices are contrasted with liberal laws, especially to show the contradiction between religious authority and human freedoms. This became especially apparent in the Dutch discussion about (converted) Muslim youngsters going to Syria to wage war against the al-Assad regime in 2013. Many media portrayed these youngsters as tied to the authority of Islam, while many of these same youngsters themselves argued that they had the right to go to war, arguing from the context of the Western free self (and often contrary to the emphatic advice of several mosques). Another example in which the religious authority behind Muslim practices was contested is the dispute surrounding ritual slaughter in the same context. While Dutch politicians tried to ban ritual slaughter and stress animal rights instead, arguing that it should be illegal to hurt animals unnecessarily just to obey Allah, Dutch Muslims (and Jews) argued that the amendment of the law would be highly hypocritical in a context of intensive animal farming and downloaded confronting pictures of 'legal' animal abuse on YouTube. Both discussions were not about Islam as such and did not continue the Islam-bashing attitude that had dominated Dutch politics for more than a decade. They seem, rather, to be more subtle and focus not on Islam as such but on religious authority as opposed to a rational, self-governing free self.

Islam and the Identity of Europe

Discourses on the problematic presence of Islam in European contexts are not typically modern. Islam has always been assessed by dominant European imaginaries. Although Taylor situates the social imaginary of the free self that is used nowadays to assess Islam in the European Enlightenment, another strong 'social imaginary' goes back to the fifteenth century when many regions feared invasion by the Ottomans. That century saw a rather desperate pope trying to cope with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It was the time of the Italian Renaissance, with changing perspectives on the role of human creativity and fresh new insights into the nature of reality, as well as new perspectives on the human being as the center of the universe. This new time became also apparent on 19 August 1458 when a new pope, Eneas Piccolomini, was elected. Piccolomini, i.e., Pius ii, was well known in intellectual circles because of his poetry and erotic literature. But the Renaissance also had impact on the way people, including Piccolomini, saw the world.

Soon after becoming pope, Pius ii had to deal with the threat of an Ottoman invasion after the fall of Constantinople. He feared the Ottomans would penetrate deeply into European territory and capture great parts of southeastern

Europe. Pius called for a crusade against the invading Ottomans, a political-religious tool that had been passed on to him from the late medieval world. But he put his call into modern language, summoning the "princes of Europe" to defend their fatherland and Christianity. In this call, he revitalized the term 'Europe,' which had generally been in disuse since Charlemagne. For Pius II, 'Europe' meant the same as 'Christianity,' which had to be defended against the invading Turks (Davies 1996) that he portrayed as the aggressive followers of the "false prophet" of an "Arabia full of fallacies," a perverse and oversexed "forger of Christian scriptures" (Meserve and Simonetta 2003: 211).

There are several interesting remarks to make about Pius' character sketch of the prophet of Islam. First, Pius still stands in a long tradition in which Islam was not seen as a totally different religious tradition (Lapidus 2008: 59–73). Already since John of Damascus wrote in 743 about the "heresy of Mamet" as something "to laugh about" (Gaudeul 1990: 13), Islam was seen as an Arian variety of Christianity. This perspective became a persistent tradition in many European countries. Of course, for most 'Europeans,' there existed only one tradition at that time, which was Christianity split into Eastern and Western branches. Islam was the heresy of a Christian heretic, Mamet or Muhammad, or someone who absolutely misconceived the fundamentals of what Christianity was all about. It was simply impossible to understand Islam as a different religion. For Pius II in the second half of the fifteenth century, both Christianity and a worldview based on Renaissance perspectives on the center-periphery divide prevented him from assessing Islam with different tools.

A second striking observation about Pius' portrayal of Muhammad is that, throughout history, there seems to be a constant obsession with the physical aspects of Muslims. Western historical representations of the Orient are full of sexual fantasies. We see the same obsession in the ninth- and tenth-century polemics on the Iberian Peninsula where Muhammad is portrayed as a man who had no control over his sexual behavior. And we see late echoes of the same obsession today in cartoons on Muhammad's polygamy and pedophilia.

The third and, within the argument of this paper, most obvious remark we can make about Pius' portrayal of Muhammad is that they show exactly the opposite of Pius' interpretation of Europe's Christian self-perspective. The idea of Muhammad as the opposite of Christian values or even as an antichrist also has a strong tradition and stems particularly from the time before the crusades when little was known about Islam (the first translation of the Qur'an into Latin was done in the first half of the twelfth century by Petrus Venerabilis). Eulogius of Cordoba (d. 859), among others, wrote about a Muhammad who ordered his followers to "kill thy enemies" and claimed to rise from the dead within three days (which, of course, did not happen). By portraying Muhammad this way,

a clear message was given not only about the cruel Ottomans but also about the truth of Christian behavior and identity.

Pius II was certainly not alone in portraying the prophet of Islam this way. The stereotypes he used betray the rich but also monotonous and consistent history of portrayals of Muhammad in (Western) European Christianity. The connection of these stereotypes with 'Europe,' however, understood 'Europe' as a religious-political construct that received its meaning not only through a direct threat of the Islamic Ottomans to Europe alone but also through the labels used for Muhammad as the corrupt source of the Islamic faith. 'Europe' became an imaginary that included certain practices and beliefs while excluding other beliefs and becoming entangled within a dialectical process in which its self-affirmation coincided with its perspective on religious otherness (Watt 1972; Hodgson, 1993; Daniel 2009).

Although many things have changed since the fifteenth century and modernity certainly produced other (mainly exotic) portrayals of Muhammad and epistemologies of Islam, the inclusion and exclusion dynamic that was at work in the turbulent genesis of 'Europe' as a political construct still haunts perspectives on European identities and disputes about the European Union. Lively discussions take place on the question whether Turkey may join the EU or not. In March 2013, the Dutch Christian Union (Christen Unie, CU), a small political party, argued that Turkey could 'never' join the EU as long as it is Islamic. This line of argument adds another aspect to 'Europe' that is seen not only in the Netherlands but also in countries like Belgium and France: Europe represents a Judeo-Christian culture, and this explicitly means that the social imaginaries of tolerance, free speech, democracy, and free choice, the imaginaries of European liberal democracy, are non-Islamic. As a result, European Muslims are only European as long as they are not Islamic.

Europe's Shadow Side: A Conclusion

Whether Islam appears in a Christian or in a secular context, the important function of Islam is to sustain certain self-perspectives. As Montgomery Watt has argued, based on his analysis of the Islamic presence in Europe: "the distorted image of Islam is to be regarded as a projection of the shadow-side of European man" (Watt 1972: 84). In other words, Islam covers what 'we' are not. This function is important and not limited to premodern times. On the contrary, while Christian representations of Islam could focus on Islam's role as a good example of a violent heresy (stressing the true doctrines and peaceful ambitions of the church and the prudery of its monks), in modern times

Islam negotiates between the modern passion to control (Bauman) and Europe's perspective of a free, liberal, and democratic unity based on the freedom and independent development of its citizens (Taylor). Islam rouses not only the passion to control but also the fear of what lies beyond the boundaries of the free self. Current discourses on Islam show a serious concern with the question how to deal with an 'otherness' that does not automatically fit with 'us,' that is dominated by a free choice to submit oneself to religious authority and brings in a real challenge to liberal, democratic authorities that demand free communication based on self-governing individualities. The all-encompassing persuasive energy of this demand equals Bauman's liquid modernity.

Whereas in the populist frame Islam negotiates dialectically between what we think we are (tolerant, democratic, free, etc.) and what we do not want to be (intolerant, authoritarian, etc), a frame in which Islam was simply presented as the other side of civilization, the current focus on Islamic or religion-based practices in the juridical context of the secular neutral state reveals a different negotiation. Should the state favor the freedom of religion above the freedom of choice and the freedom of religion above the rights of animals etc.? Although the discussion seems to be moving in the direction of rights versus freedoms, beneath the surface of this discussion lies a different, age-old idea that somehow functions as an affirmation of the Western European imaginary of the free human being and building one's opinion and choices on the idea of a free independent self: the idea that religion stands for authority, that there is no free choice within religion, that there is no freedom of speech, and that religion violates the integrity of human beings, especially women, gays, and children. Beneath the surface of these juridical discourses lies this idea of religion as authoritarian, which contrasts with the social imaginary of the free self. Religion is about boundaries, about not being a real human self or being an imprisoned self, whereas the secular state with its Judeo-Christian values stands for development, progression, and freedom.

But how authoritarian is Islam? And does this perspective on authoritarian religion not hide the authority of the secular state itself, with its discourses on freedom and liberation (Cavanaugh 2009: 5)? The perspective on religion, especially Islam, as authoritarian reveals an element that belongs to the dynamics of modernity as presented by Bauman. Islam not only sustains the imaginary of the independent self by drawing its 'other side' but also rouses a passionate practice of control and a deep wish to conform the other to the imagined self, even though this assimilation means the eradication of social difference and putting everyone into the imaginary of current individualism. Bauman has argued that assimilation is in the front line of what he calls

"social engineering," the effort to reduce difference as uncontrollable chaos to identifiable political and economic entities (Bauman 2000: 147). Presenting Islam as barbaric, uncivilized, and premodern or, as we see in current debates, as authoritative and contrary to the law rouses the modern political passion to control and legitimates all kinds of legal, coercive measures that limit the spatial visibility of Muslim practices. At the same time, however, it is exactly this passion for control that hides behind the excessive stress on the free self. So, in the end, it is Islam that brings out the authoritarian emphasis on the free self as a dubious or at least ambivalent dynamic of a modernity that sees itself as European. This gives the presence of Islam in Europe an almost revealing function of coercive strategies of rational control and the over-controlled free self. The freedom of the prophet of Islam and, in this image, the freedom of Muslims in Europe is indeed Europe's biggest cultural and legal challenge.

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