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# Politics of Islamic Praying in European Publics

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Covering and praying, two Islamic prescriptions ,bring religion into public life and debate in Europe. Praying in Europe where Muslims are in minority becomes a public issue. From the perspective of the liberal discourse on religious freedom and the freedom to exercise one's faith requires a place for worship. The author selects three different practices of praying that have provoked a public debate to illustrate the specificity of contesting religious practices in a European context. Confrontation with Islam carries also European citizens and countries that were considered to be in the periphery of Europe to the Center. Switzerland, a non-EU member, becomes European, enters into the center of European debates by the Islamic door.

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Muslim inhabitants of European cities bring religion to the forefront of public attention. Islam acquires public visibility by the manifestation of personal symbols of faith across Europe. Islamic difference is manifested by young female students who choose to cover their hairs, adopt Islamic dress codes in Europe. Such practices have triggered a major public debate in France, known as the headscarf debate, and later to be followed by the "burka" debate. Islamic covering of women, ranging from a simple headscarf, to total veiling of body and face is such an example of Islamic difference perceived in "anachronism" and in opposition with European values of gender equality and secularism. A project of law to ban the ostentatious religious signs, namely Islamic headscarf in the public schools and the total veiling (hair, face and body) in the streets was put into practice in conformity with the public opinion. A consensus was achieved between public opinion at large and the political initiative to ban the Islamic religious symbols from the public life. However such a majority consensus, bringing together different political classes and public citizens, unifying them under a presumed category of national, secular, Western values against new comers, minority groups, carries as well a potential threat that undermines inclusionary politics of democracy and participative public life.

## **Covering and praying**

Islamic covering is adopted by some young group of women who turns towards Islamic faith and at the same time they express their ambitions to pursue their educational and professional trajectories in Europe. Total veiling on the other hand is adopted only by a minority of women, following a more fundamentalist and ascetic interpretation of Islam. Among them there are also converts, hence "native" citizens of Europe. Covering and praying, two Islamic prescriptions ,bring religion into public life and debate in Europe. Although Islamic covering of women is a source of theological debate among Muslims as well, praying is considered as a major religious ritual shared by all the faithful. Praying is an obligation for every pious person, a shared expression of faith by majority of Muslims. Praying in Europe where Muslims are in minority becomes a public issue. From the perspective of the liberal discourse on religious freedom and the freedom to exercise one's faith requires a place for worship. In

that respect, claim for praying rooms and construction of mosques for Muslims living in Europe can be approached as a right for religious freedom. However, such liberal discourses of religious freedom fall short of framing the religious claims. Covering and praying, as new forms of Islamic visibility in Europe provoke a series of reactions and debates on secular norms and European values, calling in some cases for prohibitive legislations against such visibilities across Europe. The referendum that banned the minaret construction in Switzerland follows and illustrates these dynamics at work. (1)

### **Contesting religious practices**

Islam in a migrant, secular European context acquires different meanings and forms. The context of immigration requires an effort for Muslims to re-learn and practice their religion. Muslims have to struggle and search for ways of being a “good Muslim” in a multi-religious secular European context.

Therefore religious faith is not a fixed, given, opaque category but un-stabilized by migrant dislocations and subject to reinterpretation in the European context. Chains of transmission of religious knowledge are broken, intergenerational transmission and learning in the family, as well as faith community in the countries of origin are not sufficient (linguistic and environmental differences) to provide a guidance for young generations. In a secular and multi-religious environment, faith is constantly subject to learning and supervision leading to a more rigorous search for piousness and higher awareness of one’s faith. I’ll select three different practices of praying that have provoked a public debate to illustrate the specificity of contesting religious practices in a European context.

a) Muslim prayer in a Berlin high-school. In Berlin’s Wedding district, a 16 year old Berlin boy called Yunus was the first student in Germany to demand the right to conduct his prayers at school. Following a religious obligation to pray five times a day at set times creates tensions in an environment of a high school regulated with secular norms. He had been praying during class breaks, by kneeling on his jacket, laid out in a school hallway. The court first said that to ban the student from praying at school would violate his right for religious freedom and agreed for a requirement to have a prayer room. But others argued that school is a neutral space, condition to allow plurality of beliefs. Some others put under suspicion Yunus’s religious convictions, interpreting the praying practice as a political act. At the end a Berlin court 27.5.2010 ruled that praying at school could cause conflict and disturb peace in school. Not the end of the dispute; there is an appeal at a higher Court, Federal Court.

b) In front of the Dome cathedral in Milan a public prayer took place in January 2009 after a manifestation organized by leftist and pacifist associations against Israeli occupation of Gaza. The public debate that followed revolved around several arguments: the public praying has shown the lack of a mosque in the eyes of Muslims, whereas Catholics have expressed their feeling of being invaded by a foreign religion; some have put the emphasis on the political feature of the praying and questioned the intentionality of the religious practice, and others have questioned the loyalty of Muslims citizens to Italy as they have manifested for Palestine.

c) The third example concerns Cordoba mosque-cathedral, Mezquita and the praying of a revert citizen in front of it. It is the most well known heritage of Muslim Spain and the Reconquista period, witnessing the presence of Muslims in Spain from the VIII to XV century most accomplished moment of the Umayyad period in Cordoba. In 786 the Umayyad bought the land of St.Vincent church and constituted a mosque. It was transformed into a church after

the Reconquista and then into a cathedral. Mansur Escudero (passed away in October 2010 at the age of 63), President of the Islamic Council, himself convert, a “revert” Muslim, demanded the right for Muslim praying in the Mezquito. He wished to transform the cathedral into a multi-faith centre that includes a mosque. He prayed in front of the Mezquito (2007) to make his claim public and said he was looking to “soften the heart of the bishop”.

All uncanny examples of praying of Muslims, diasporas, reverts, immigrants in Europe where religious faith, culture and rituals are manifested in an environment in which Muslims are not a majority. They bring into the public agenda a series of novel issues, such as lack of praying rooms, and mosques in the center of cities. Praying which is common to all monotheistic religions becomes divisive and controversial, becomes a site of public debate; whether it is an expression of faith, cultural identity, or political instrumentalization. The rights of Muslim minorities for citizenship are debated also in relation to questions of loyalty, whether they have different loyalties such as to their countries of origin, to Palestinian cause, to global Islamic networks that funds mosques and train imams.

These three distinct examples illustrate well the different faces of European Islam, the way Islamic religion is interpreted, manifested by European citizens of different origins. The Muslim past in Cordoba, and the issue of conversion (reversion) to Islam, Muslim immigration and transnational loyalties (Palestine cause), young school boy in Berlin and integration all witness the different faces of European Islam. Each case brings forth different forms of praying, and the changing frontiers between private religion and public visibility, personal pioussness and public perceptions, between faith and politics; collective praying and political manifestation, student praying in a public school, convert praying as a protest. Each of these performances bring forth the question of space and its neutrality, whether secularism is a condition for pluralism or a hindrance of multi-religious, multi-cultural society is tested in each of these cases. (Public school in Berlin, public space in front of the Cathedral in Milan, Mezquito in Cordoba all in different ways reveals the tensions between secular and religious, as well as between different religions).

The issue of space, citizenship and State authority are closely related with each other. These cases reveal the ways in which religious identities change and contest politics of secularity and neutrality. Politics of praying reveal the question of ownership and exclusion in space, the norms that organize a space and the imprint of State authority that defines and controls the frontiers between private and public distinctions, religious and sacred norms, established citizens and “strangers”.

Mosque itself is an interface between Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants. Which forms, spaces, and concepts to accord to a mosque? Does a mosque always have a dome and a minaret? Can we have a mosque that would not be identifiable as such? Can we separate the minarets from the mosques? Can we replace the word “mosque,” a word that some fear, with “place of prayer”? In Europe, minarets and mosques face “existential” problems; the minarets are always mute without the muezzins’ call to prayer, and the mosques acquire new architectural forms in response to the landscape and the heritage of their surroundings. How can the mosque rally different ethnic communities? Do, for example, Turks frequent the mosques of Pakistanis in Birmingham? Are the Turkish mosques of Berlin also frequented by North Africans and other Muslim minorities? How to choose the language of the sermon? How might one rethink the space of the mosque for women, for the youth, and as the site of diverse activities? All of these questions are important in light of the real lives and daily experiences of Muslims in Europe. The mosque is an interface between the urban

environment, Muslim citizens, and religious pluralism. Accepting its visibility leads to a series of negotiations and regulations—esthetic, religious, financial, architectural, and spatial in nature—in the process of making it an object of a common heritage in-becoming. (2)

Islamic religion enters into a phase of interpretation and change, becoming “indigenous” and European, meaning personal practices of piety but also collective social experimentation and negotiation. Prohibitive legislations that exclude Muslim participation in public life ends this process by exclusionary politics, they put a halt to the process of interaction and mutual borrowings. Democracy is a place of negotiable, whereas the public opinions and politics claiming for the non-negotiable can betray the democratic ideal.

### **New transnational european populist right and islamophobia**

Confrontation with Islam carries also European citizens and countries that were considered to be in the periphery of Europe to the Center. Switzerland, a non-EU member, becomes European, enters into the center of European debates by the Islamic door. Other European countries start discussing the Swiss referendum intensively, either as an error to be avoided or as an act of public courage expressing what people think in private. The Swiss anti-minaret poster is reproduced in other European countries by similar movements such as Pro-Koln movement in Germany, The Northern League in Italy, British Nationalist Party in England. Anti-Islam movement instigates a transnational European dynamics. Marginal political figures—such as Oscar Freysinger in Switzerland, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Philippe de Villiers and Marine Le Pen— become popular public figures for the mainstream politics. They operate a change of discourse and political agenda in shifting from anti-immigration issues to anti-Islam politics. Actors who choose to confront Islam, either by putting the emphasis on religion or gender issues become audible and popular in European publics. Ex-progressiste actors of post-68 movement join these populist trends. The discourse of freedom of expression, gender equality, secularism are mobilized in counter-distinction with European muslims. Islam becomes an active force in the Europeanization of public sphere. But the question remains if this Europe is not turning against its democratic ideals by means of politics of fear, dressing new cultural frontiers, engaging politics of exclusion. Politics of praying becomes a challenge in redefining European public life and cultural pluralism.

*Notes:*

1) The referendum was held on 29 November 2009 in Switzerland. The initiative for the referendum was taken not by the State, but by the “Egerkinger Committee”, composed of two right-wing populist parties: the Swiss People’s Party and the Federal Democratic Union. 57 percent of voters approved a legislation to be included in the Constitution to ban minaret constructions.

2) See my articles where I elaborate this topic more in detail. Nilüfer Göle, “Les minarets, symboles muets de l’Islam et leur résonance dans l’espace public européen”, [RESET-DOC](#); and “Mute Symbols of Islam”, [The Immanent Frame](#).