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# The silent symbols of Islam and their importance in the European public sphere

*Nilüfer Göle*

Islam becomes a political and cultural source for identifying immigrants, their quest for acknowledgment. They in turn manifest their particular citizenship within the European public arena. This visibility marks the end of a stage in the migratory phenomenon, that of integration, as well as experiences and ways of appropriating the public sphere in Europe. It is the difficulty in acknowledging this passage from foreigner to citizen that lies beneath the controversies surrounding Islam. The concept of acknowledging Islam and Muslims as a phenomenon endogenous to Swiss society has been rejected.

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Every time I cross the Galata Bridge I never tire of gazing in amazement at the view of Istanbul where the silhouettes of its tall minarets stand out like drawings. Unlike the Eiffel Tower, the many discreet minarets are not erected as symbols of the city of Istanbul. And yet, without its slim minarets symbolising man's spiritual elevation towards God, Istanbul would lose part of its soul. In the eyes of both its pious and secular inhabitants, Muslims and non-Muslims, the minarets are part of the familiar landscape of a shared legacy. Of course many regret that new mosques built in contemporary Turkey are far from a match for those of the great architect Mimar Sinan, created in the glorious age of the Ottoman Empire. Most contemporary mosques lack any architectural innovation, any finesse or proportion between the domes and the minarets. Even the calls to prayer, after the adoption of loudspeakers and recordings have become a constant source of public debate addressing the nuisance caused by the noise.

Public debate, however, is not restricted to these subjects. Projects to reopen Saint Sophia as a place of worship for Muslims and the building of a new mosque in the heart of Istanbul have for decades caused lively and passionate controversy. A controversy that divides citizens into those objecting to signs of islamisation and those who wish to mark its social rise with religious symbols in the public sphere. This gap between those defining themselves as defenders of secularism and the more religious who demand freedom of conscience, is one that currently affects all political life in Turkey. The conflict has intensified since minarets were compared to bayonets and mosques to barracks, in a poem recited in public by Recep Tayyip Erdogan after he won the 1997 elections. Turkey's current prime minister was sentenced and imprisoned for "inciting religious hatred" after reciting these verses attributed to a nationalist poet, expressing himself about the national war of independence.

One is entitled to be astonished that in a country like Turkey with its Muslim majority, Islam's historical and cultural symbols are no longer part of the unchangeable and peaceful familiar legacy and have assumed a new public visibility and reawakened religious and political differences. One could ask oneself when and how a symbol, or an object, familiar

and imperceptible to us should one day become “visible” and therefore ostentatious and upsetting in the eyes of the public? The Swiss referendum, that with a popular and majority vote decided to ban the building of minarets, has revealed that Islam’s visibility is distressing in the eyes of Europeans. Simultaneously this conflict confirms the transformation of the terms of the debate on Islam in Europe.

First of all the public visibility of Islam’s religious and cultural symbols marks the presence of Muslims in Europe. Just like the other silent symbol, the veil, minarets reveal the presence of Muslims both pious and female in public life. This visibility certifies the presence of Muslims in European society and their desire to remain there, demanding freedom of conscience, freedom to practice their religion and also the freedom to dress according to their personal interpretation of their religion. Paradoxically, Islam becomes a political and cultural source for identifying immigrants, their quest for acknowledgment. They in turn manifest their particular citizenship within the European public arena. This visibility marks the end of a stage in the migratory phenomenon, that of integration, as well as experiences and ways of appropriating the public sphere in Europe. It is the difficulty in acknowledging this passage from foreigner to citizen that lies beneath the controversies surrounding Islam.

The debates on minarets and on the ban to build them have born witness to Swiss society’s problems in acknowledging the presence of Muslims who are establishing their roots and their place in public life. Debates have been feeding on the feeling that Islam is invading their territories and the fear of losing one’s “home”. Speeches include demands for Muslims to build their minarets “in their own countries,” posters compared them to dangerous “black sheep” hence as “foreign” and symbolically expelled. All the semantics of the debate seem to indicate that the concept of acknowledging Islam and Muslims as a phenomenon endogenous to Swiss society has been rejected. The debate’s leitmotiv, to protect oneself in one’s own country from this conquering religion, also conceals a reticence experienced by Swiss citizens in renouncing a monopoly over their public sphere. The non-democratic aspect of this referendum lies in its intention to contain and freeze the public arena in its strict adaptation to the nation, refusing to open it to a plurality of citizens. On one hand, Muslims, with their multiple attachments, including languages, ethnic groups, religions and *oumma*, disturb the national definition of citizenship awakening suspicion regarding their loyalty. The definition of a public sphere identifying with a pre-established national community can only create tension and exclusion in a world filled with migratory and transnational dynamics, be these religious, economic or cultural.

Secondly, Islam’s passage to the West causes Muslims to address a series of new issues that characterise Islam in Europe in a particular manner. Islam that has become European, exacerbates the paradox of visibility and invisibility. Unlike what happens in Muslim countries, here the minarets are silent and the mosques are discreet. Concerned with security and transparency, European democracies have encouraged the visibility of places of worship, inviting them to abandon cellars and garages and show themselves. Nonetheless, it is not that simple to provide a mosque with visibility. What form should it have, what space should it occupy, what ideas should be attributed to it? Does a mosque always have a dome and a minaret? Is it possible to create a mosque that is not identifiable? Is it possible to separate mosques from minarets as the Swiss hope? Is it possible to replace the word “mosque” which frightens some people with “place of worship”? In Europe, minarets and mosques face “existential” problems.

Minarets are always silent, without the muezzins calling people to prayers; mosques have

begun to acquire new architectural characteristics respecting the landscape and the environment. How can mosques assemble together different ethnic communities? Do, for example, the Turks in England attend Pakistani mosques in Birmingham? Are the Turkish mosques in Berlin attended by citizens of the Maghreb and by other Muslim minorities? How can one ensure that mosques are acknowledged as the public and religious space of European Muslims? According to what criteria should one decide what language should be used for preaching? How should one rethink the mosque area for women, for the young and for various activities? These are all questions that become more important when considering the experiences and daily lives of Muslims in Europe. Mosques act as an interface between the urban environment, Muslim citizens and religious pluralism. Accepting their visibility involves a series of negotiations and rules that involve aesthetics, worship, finance, architecture and space, so as to create objects of a future shared legacy. The Swiss referendum has now imposed non-negotiability and it is also in this sense that this referendum indicates a non-democratic attitude, because it involves stopping the process of evolution, exchange and cultural mixing.

### **The sensation caused by the minarets: Islam obliges Europe to go public**

Far from being restricted to the Swiss context, this referendum caused a sensation in other countries and set off a transnational European debate. Some deplored the Swiss mistake saying it should not be repeated, others applauded the courage of having said what everyone thinks. Surveys in France have revealed that most people are in favour of restricting the building of mosques. The BNP in the UK has copied the “anti-minaret” poster used by the Swiss populist party (UDC). The poster depicts the national flag (Swiss, British) pierced by minarets shaped like guns. There is also an image of a woman wearing a burqa. In the British version there are also the verses recited by Tayyip Erdogan (see above). In public debates in Europe, these same verses alluding to the “bayonets” of the minarets are continuously repeated out of context. One can see how the debate on minarets in particular, and Islam’s visibility in general, results in transnational dynamics and gatherings of diverse elements. One sees that even Europe’s insular Great Britain and isolated Switzerland are part of the European public sphere. Fear of Islam is exploited by the various populist political parties and the “politics of anti-islamisation” also resonates within the silent majority. Marginal political figures such as Oscar Freysinger in Switzerland, Gert Wilders in Holland or Philippe de Villiers in France, have contributed to changing national political agendas and gained popularity with their battle against an Islamic presence in Europe.

It is around the themes addressing Islamic visibility that collective passions and public debates mobilise. Veils at schools, burqas in the streets, mosques in cities and minarets visible in the landscape make manifest the presence of Muslim players in daily life (at times with an exacerbated and fragmented Islamism) but also introduce to the public agenda and debate the secular rules to be applied in the public sphere. These subjects oblige the public sphere to endure the test of a public debate than runs the risk of being poisoned by the politics of fear. When personal feelings are touched, and visceral and emotional elements are emphasised, the public sphere becomes a place of prejudice. European democracies developed by distinguishing between opinions and truth, by ensuring the use of reason within the public debate. Current political populism is mobilised against this European tradition of an “enlightened public”. The public sphere risks losing its role as the ideal expression of democracy and becomes the place of shared awareness, rendering sacred public opinion, and contaminating all that is sensational and scandalous. It is because of this regression experienced by the public debate, now inclined towards the irrational and the emotional, that

the Swiss referendum betrays the democratic ideal.

*Translated by Francesca Simmons*