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INTRODUCTION

From Clash to Encounter

It's graduation day at Harvard University, or “Commencement,” as they call it here. The mood of the day—which marks the end of an era for each student and the beginning of a new one—is always one of great solemnity. On this particular sunny day of July 6, 2002, the families of the graduates have gathered in the Yard, that mythical square bit of greenery that makes up the heart of the University.

Zayed Yasin, a major in Biology and Pre-med, stands and walks toward the large tent to deliver one of the commencement speeches, a privilege reserved for only a few. The message he proposes to deliver to the assembled crowd: “Faith and Citizenship: My American Jihad.” In spite of protests, a petition signed by 1,300 people, and pressure exerted on the ceremony's organizing committee to read the speech in advance, Zayed is there. The word *jihad* has been struck from the title, but the content of the speech has been neither toned down nor censored. The words are ones of reconciliation and appeasement, and their meaning is clear: it is possible to be both an active Muslim and an American citizen without experiencing a conflict of values.

Later, I take the airplane at Logan airport—under heightened security since September 11. My passport is checked by a young woman wearing *hijab*, alone in the middle of her other colleagues, clean-shaven men and women without veils.

In Paris, Woissila and Ilham organized a demonstration on December 21, 2003, to protest a bill that proposed to outlaw all “ostentatious” forms of religious expression in the public schools. More than 3,000 people participated in the demonstration. On January 17, another rally, this time organized by

the French Muslim Party, attracted over 11,000 protesters. “We must politically terrorize those who insult us,” goes the slogan of Mohamed Latrèche, president of the party.

These are the contrasting images of Islam on the two sides of the Atlantic: one, American, conciliatory even in the damaged environment of post-September 11; the other, European, more conflictual and hostile. These two images reflect not only a difference in the styles and attitudes of Muslims in the various countries, but, also and especially, a difference in the societies that are in the process of integrating them. Of course, difficulties certainly exist on the North American continent as well. Who could deny the atmosphere of extreme suspicion brought on by the “War on Terror,” which has resulted in an explosion of discriminatory acts against the daily observance of Islam? And in Europe, positive signs are beginning to emerge with the ascent of new Muslim political and intellectual leaders on both the local and the national levels. What is common to both continents is the influence of international politics on the domestic conditions of Muslim minorities. In other words, there is a widespread tendency to conflate Islam as an international political force with the ordinary Muslims living as a minority population in the countries of the West. This conflation has consequences not only for the minority condition of Muslims themselves, but also for current scholarship on the European and American manifestations of Islam.

Western Perceptions of Islam: The Logic of War

The simultaneous visibility of Islam on both sides of the Atlantic encounters equal hostility from the societies that host it, albeit for different demographic and historical reasons. Islam is seen as both the enemy outside and the enemy within. Long before the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and the attack on the Pentagon of September 11, 2001, political Islam above all else was feared from Muslim society.

The media presents a one-sided view of Islam that exploits the ambiguities of images and terminology, encouraging the stereotypical connections between Islam, violence, and fanaticism. These stereotypes obscure all other aspects of the Muslim world, and the ordinary citizen whose knowledge is limited to the 6 o'clock news has only a dim understanding of events in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, or Afghanistan. In thinking of Islam and the Islamic world, this citizen feels only fear, particularly insofar as the different shades of religious and political belief are treated as one homogenous entity. It is hardly surprising, then, that when these same citizens are asked—as they were in the United States in 1994—if they consider Islamic resurgence to be

a danger, 61 percent say yes. For the greater part of the general American public, Islamic revivalism is, quite simply, a synonym for global terrorism. In Europe, the fear of Islam takes similar forms: in a 1991 survey, 51 percent of people in France stated that the greatest danger for France came from the Global South. Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Algeria were cited as the four countries most feared, specifically due to their Muslim character.¹

Certainly, a series of events over the past 20 years, each one more “explosive” than the last, have provided indelible images of all the militant versions of Islam: the Iranian Revolution and the taking of hostages at the American Embassy, the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, the Lebanese hostages, the Rushdie affair, the crisis in Algeria, the conflict in Afghanistan. Islam, now perceived as a significant risk factor in international relations, has taken the place of Communism as the most pressing global threat. In the language used not only by the Pentagon, but also by NATO, certain countries or regions “of an Islamic character”—whether this refers to Iran or the Sudan—find themselves at the top of the list of those labeled as “terrorist” by the American administration.

Confronted with this situation, scholarly research on Islam (particularly in Europe) has not always been successful in escaping the trap of presenting Islam and Muslims as a special case. The crucial question for scholars of Islam, which recent events have done nothing to change, is that of Muslim integration in European societies. Integration here means not only socio-economic adaptation, but also acculturation to mainstream culture and to secularization. That is, is Muslim integration comparable to the process other immigrants have undergone, or does the fact of being Muslim indeed constitute some kind of extraordinary situation?²

This question, which underlies almost all European research on Islam, has been exaggerated and to a certain degree biased by various political agendas. In Europe, political interest in Islamic integration has existed since the 1980s. This interest is due to the influence of certain Islamic political movements in neighboring Islamic countries—such as the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), based in Algeria, or the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey (a reincarnation of the Refah Party, banned in 1998)—not to mention the close ties between certain European countries and Islamic nations such as Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey, as a result of colonial and postcolonial history. We should note that the term “Islamophobia” emerged as early as 1997, during the discussions in Britain on the topic of anti-Muslim discrimination.³ This fact should indicate that the process of victimization, which affects all European Muslims, was already well underway long before September 11, 2001.⁴ The practical consequence of this is that most of the works on Islam

published in Europe merely attempt to deconstruct the misrepresentations and false notions that rule over the discriminatory practices against Islam and Muslims.

In the United States, on the other hand, political and media interest in Islam is almost entirely an after-effect of September 11—which, if the European precedent is any indication, will undoubtedly influence American research on Islam in the decade to come. Although religion is not necessarily a taboo subject for American scholarship, American research on Muslims has, thus far, primarily taken an ethnographic approach. The broad ethnic diversity of American Muslims has essentially favored the production of works focusing on local ethnic communities, with some—such as Black Muslims or the Arab community of Detroit—more frequently studied than others. Despite several pioneering works,⁵ a thorough examination of the diversity of Islamic religious practices and methods of adaptation to American society, via the systematic comparison of different ethnic groups, remains to be written.

Nevertheless, the extremely tense political climate that has surrounded the question of Islam since September 11, 2001, has in fact brought European and American research closer together. Islamophobia continues to remain strong in Europe, and is expressed in public with increasing frequency. During the 1990s in France, anti-Islamic statements were almost exclusively the prerogative of the far right. Today, however, intellectuals, journalists, writers, and artists unashamedly express their aversion to Islam.⁶ In an interview in the September 2001 issue of the magazine *Lire*, the writer Michel Houellebecq stated: “Islam is definitely the most f . . . p of all the religions.” Oriana Fallaci’s *La rage et l’orgueil (Rage and Pride)*,⁷ which sold more than a million copies in Italy and France, is a collection of insults aimed at Islam and Muslims that resulted in the author being prosecuted for inciting racial hatred in October 2003. That same year, on October 24, the founder of the newspaper *Le Point* declared himself an Islamolophobe, calling the Islamic religion an “inanity of various archaicisms.”⁸ Similarly, in the United States, insults against Muslims or against Islam continue to pour forth, even if the term “Islamophobia” is itself never spoken. On April 23, 2004, a Boston radio announcer even called for all Muslims to be killed. Since September 11, 2001, Evangelical leaders have produced scores of pronouncements and publications attacking the idea of any coexistence with either Islam or Muslims. This same aversion can be found at the highest levels of government, in statements by the attorney general and by high-ranking military officers.⁹

Avoiding the Essentialist Trap

Such anti-Islamic discourse has the additional affect of hiding the complexities of change and acculturation that bear not only on Muslims but also on the cultural and political institutions of Europe and the United States. It utterly fails to take into account the fluid and contradictory reality of Islam’s integration into Western societies.

Existing European and American scholarship on Muslims often amounts to little more than a description of Muslims’ modes of adaptation to their new context,¹⁰ accompanied by a critique of the general atmosphere of Islamophobia.¹¹ Certainly, a critique of domination is an important step in explaining the condition of Muslims in the West. But such an approach is insufficient; one must also examine the instances and places of reciprocal influence between the cultural constructs of the European and Muslim worlds. This mutual influence creates a transcultural space in which theories of opposition can give way to a more subtle analysis. As Salvatore and Hofert have pointed out,¹² both Western religion and the Western conception of modernity have been deeply influenced by the transcultural space between Europe and the Middle East, even during eras in which the Western powers ruled over the Muslim world. The idea of Western culture that emerged with the birth of modernity corresponds to a specific political and cultural situation, in which the West came to define itself in opposition to the Ottoman Empire. The crystallizing of this identity *vis-à-vis* the Muslim Other is frequently found in literature from the sixteenth century onward, for example, in the writings of the Renaissance Orientalist Guillaume Postel, often considered the originator of the dialogue between Islam and Christianity.

This book attempts to examine Muslim immigration to Europe and North America as the foundational moment of a new transcultural space, which still remains to be analyzed. This transcultural moment takes place within the context of globalization, this particular period characterized by the mobility of cultures and religions. Any understanding of the Muslim minority in the West must, therefore, take the phenomenon of global Islam into account as well. Once again, the risk is of taking Islam out of context, reducing it to a series of essentialized symbols and principles. In order to break through the iron cage of stereotypical Islamic images and representations, then, one must consider discursive practices of religion in general, and of Islam in particular. No religion or culture can be taken as a given. Instead of trying to discover what constitutes the essential quality of Islam, one must examine the social and historical contexts within which Muslims create their discourse on what is important or unimportant in Islam, in *their* Islam.

As Talal Asad notes, tradition is the conglomeration of discursive practices that allow believers to determine what is correct and meaningful for a given time.¹³ Avoiding essentializing descriptions means not to assume that meaning is constructed as a unified system, from the international to the national and local level. Islam, then, should be considered as a conglomeration of discursive practices, situated within the democracies of the West. These discursive practices are not only debates about the content of Islamic observance, but also about what it means to observe Islam in the first place. The act of going to the mosque to pray, the choice of whether to eat *halal* or drink wine, to wear the *hijab* or a miniskirt, all have to do with Islamic discourse every bit as much as the discussions taking place in books, in conferences, and on websites. It is necessary to examine how the production of meaning and cultural symbols intersect among different levels of communication and action—in local, national, and international contexts—and to refuse to define these levels *a priori*.

In order to avoid the trap of essentializing either Islam or Muslims, several considerations must be taken into account. First, this study avoids any sort of unilateral approach that confines itself only to the examination of religious or cultural changes among Muslims. Instead, this study explores the *mutual* transformation that is currently changing both Islam and the Western societies with which it interacts. To this end, Part I of this book examines how the nationalism and secularism of Western societies are transformed by Muslim presence, at the same time as these new political and cultural circumstances are transforming Muslims' Islamic practice into a individualized and less public act of faith (chapters 2 and 3). The secularization of Islam is seen in the transformation of individual religious observance, as well as the acceptance—by the vast silent majority—of the separation between public and private space respective to each society. In some European countries, this secularization also manifests itself in the creation of Islamic organizations—often associated with or even established by the government, as in Belgium and France—designed to represent Islam in the public arena (chapter 4).

Through their words as well as their actions, Muslims in the West contribute to the imaginary of contemporary Islam. As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, the imagination is now itself a social and cultural force.¹⁴ Participation in the Islamic imaginary is given concrete expression in a variety of disparate religious practices and mobilizations, which are examined in detail in Part II of this book (“The Imagined Community”). The most visible of these practices have to do with participation in radical or proselytizing transnational movements such as Salafi or Wahhabi Islam. These groups promote a defensive or reactive identity, sometimes giving rise to a veritable theology of hate

(see chapter 5, “The Absolutized Community”). On the opposite end of the spectrum are practices such as the production/ consumption of Islam on the Internet, practices that signal an acceptance of modernity and which are sometimes, though not always, accompanied by real innovations and new syncretic forms of religion. Part III of this study examines how the encounter with democratic and secularized culture has brought certain long-standing crises within the Muslim world, particularly the crisis of religious authority, into sharp relief, at the same time encouraging the development of religious innovations (see chapter 7, “Bureaucratic and Parochial Leaders”). The Muslims of the diaspora are also in the process of revisiting certain concepts such as democracy, secularization, and human rights, and are questioning many interpretations of Islamic tradition. The third section discusses this phenomenon in terms of Islam's discourse on women, non-Muslims, and apostasy (see chapter 9, “The Reformation of Islamic Thought”).

The research for this study comes from several different sources. First, from surveys that we conducted in Europe and the United States during the years 1999–2003. Second, from interviews with Muslim men and women of various cultures and ethnicities, heads of religious and secular organizations, and religious leaders who allowed us to record their development, their struggles, and their hopes in cities such as Paris, Brussels, London, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. We have also been able to observe the daily life of Muslim communities in Marseille, New York, and Boston. Finally, this study has drawn on existing research on different aspects of the lives of Muslim communities in Europe and the United States, including scholarly research, official government, or administrative reports, and studies conducted by Islamic organizations, particularly in the United States.

The situation of contemporary Muslims who live as minorities in democratic and secular societies constitutes a kind of putting into practice—a “case study”—of all the theoretical and conceptual debates about democracy that have troubled the Muslim world for centuries. Moreover, the new context in which Muslims find themselves has resulted in an unprecedented and dramatic series of changes within Islam, in terms of both ritual practice and intellectual reflection. Finally, the situation of Muslims in Europe and the United States should be studied because, this evolution does not happen in isolation. It also has dramatic consequences for the ideas and concepts currently circulating in the Muslim world. The Muslim world's reaction, in 2004, to the French proposal to outlaw religious symbols, is a perfect example of the phenomenon of global Islam. In short, our study hopes to demonstrate how the Americanization/Europeanization of Islam cannot be dissociated from the space-time of global Islam, and the political crises that go along with it.