A Theology of Belonging: The Case of European Muslims Reconsidered

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There is a complex set of challenges that arise from the presence of diverse Muslim communities in Europe today. Quite rightly Muslims often feel that their communities experience disproportionate inequality, social and educational exclusion and a lack of social mobility, while facing the continuing threats of racism and Islamophobia. European Muslims argue that, after the tragic events of 9/11 in the US and the bombings in Madrid and London, they have been increasingly seen as the ‘enemy within’, and stereotyped as extremists and terrorists. On the other hand, European public opinion, as polling suggests, increasingly finds the presence of Muslims in Europe problematic and, for some, even a serious threat to secular democracy and the peace and security of its diverse societies. Moreover, according to some Europeans, Islam remains a medieval relic and is essentially a rigid faith tradition that is not compatible with the values of secular democracy. They argue that Islam needs to undergo its own reformation and enlightenment so that in public terms it can be contained within secularism but also be largely confined to the private sphere in terms of personal practice. Within such a polarised context, it is difficult to discern constructive ways to address the challenges that are strongly felt and voiced by both the Muslim community and wider society. The contentious and sensitive nature of the place of Muslims in Europe becomes evident when one takes into account the wider history of conflict and rivalry between Islam and the West.

The economic ruin of Europe in the wake of the Second World War was the main trigger for the mass arrival of Muslims to industrialised cities across Western Europe. The European states that sponsored this mass migration had turned to their former colonies to recruit the manual workforce needed to rebuild their economies. With hindsight, it is clear that little attention was paid at the time to the long-term social, cultural and political consequences of this mass migration. Such was the self-confidence in the metanarrative of secular modernity, that Europe underestimated the strength of religious belonging embedded across the diverse Muslim migrant communities settling in the continent. Most of these migrants came from traditional, rural areas in their own countries of origin and were transplanted into highly secularized and increasingly multicultural European cities. The initial expectation was that these so-called ‘guest workers’ would, after earning enough money, return back to their countries of origin. This early assumption, coupled with the mainly economic nature of this migration, led policymakers to be unconcerned with the question of how these communities would be integrated. Of course, most of these migrants decided not to return to their countries of origin, and were eventually joined by their families. Yet once again policymakers underestimated the importance of faith in shaping the social identities once Muslim sojourners with the arrival of their spouses and children became settlers; policymakers continued to address them largely within the prism of race.

Most importantly, in my view, the decolonizing European powers naively assumed that the agenda of modernization and westernization implemented in the Muslim world would lead to secular and liberal democracy in post-colonial Muslim states, notwithstanding their fragility, newness as nations, and the arbitrariness of their borders. As the new native elites enforced this programme of modernization and westernization, Islamic revival and reform movements grew in popularity. Yet what was also unrecognized was the transnational nature of these movements and their impact upon the new

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Muslim communities of Europe. These transnational religious movements aimed to engender a sense among Muslims of Europe of being part of a wider and global Muslim commonwealth, the *umma*, in the modern world, and the implications of this upon the identities of Muslim young people was largely underestimated. Similarly, the potential for historical mutual mistrust and prejudice that was characteristic of the Muslim world and Mediaeval Christendom to be retrieved as a framework for understanding, or even justification, of present-day conflict was also forgotten.

The first step in confronting this challenge is to acknowledge that this issue concerns all of us. All Europeans, Muslims or otherwise, bear responsibility in meeting this challenge. I want to contend that the most constructive long-term strategy is to encourage and develop a meaningful sense of Muslim belonging in Europe. But, given the climate of fear and prejudice, how can this daunting task be achieved?

It goes without saying that there are growing numbers of official policymakers working on the issues of Muslims in Europe. They increasingly include the intelligence services and counter-terrorist police and other security specialists. There is a growing army of social scientists, political and social commentators, and think tanks that offer analysis, sophisticated or otherwise, on political Islam. They all compete to advise politicians and to influence public opinion as to how best to manage the social, cultural, economic, political and security-related challenges associated with Muslims in Europe. Without delving into this issue further here, it would seem that all this effort has had limited impact in transforming Europe’s Muslim communities. While they have stressed the moderate nature of their faith, they have been less forthcoming in offering systemic ways of engaging with the internal challenges their communities face.

However, I would like to engage with these issues directly and suggest a faith-based perspective on how to bring about a meaningful sense of Muslim belonging in Europe. I want to argue that achieving this strategic goal requires a long-term and transformative educational strategy. As a Muslim theologian and educator, who is also a European Muslim, I ask myself what I am doing or can do to address the complex set of challenges that hinder the emergence of a mature European Muslim presence.

For more than a decade I have been working with Muslim young people and Muslim faith leaders in the UK. This experience of researching and teaching has convinced me that creating a self-critical attitude within the community remains the key to enabling European Muslims to contextualise their presence in Europe. A self-critical and self-reflective attitude is an essential requirement in developing the competence for ‘critical openness’, which will facilitate intercultural and interfaith learning and dialogue. As such, ‘critical openness’ towards plurality, both within the Muslim intellectual and civilizational legacy and within the contemporary world, indicates a willingness to nurture and embrace a Muslim sense of belonging in Europe, which attempts to synthesize the significant contextual dimensions that inform European Muslim self-understandings today. Most crucially, it should be stressed that ‘critical openness’ leads to a meaningful process of integration because it requires self-conscious engagement and assessment. I would suggest that in Europe today we need a Muslim theology that articulates a rational and meaningful way of speaking about God, that is capable of nurturing ‘critical openness’ towards both the entirety of our rich Muslim heritage and to the world around us, and that facilitates the emergence of an Islamically-meaningful sense of belonging in Europe. Of course, such a theology of belonging is obviously predicated upon the possibility that the core sources of the Muslim imagination (the Qur’an, the prophetic legacy and the wider Muslim intellectual and ethical traditions) themselves encourage this critical openness and, most importantly, nurture what I term as ‘critical faithfulness’, which I shall return to below.

In today’s plural societies, critical openness remains the key to enabling diverse communities that make up society as a whole to engage in constructive dialogue and a meaningful way of relating to each other. Although these qualities of critical thinking, openness and dialogue are most commonly associated with secular modernity, I want to argue that they are part of the human condition and that
diverse human cultures have all practised them to various degrees. Faith traditions have in principle advocated human openness towards an all-encompassing ultimate reality. In fact, nurturing a competence for transcendence seems to be a crucial aspect of human consciousness that enables us to be limit our selfish impulses and reach out and be open towards each other. There is the temptation today to think that Muslim communities can be hectored into a culture of critical openness, or paradoxically that it can even be imposed in some way. This is counter-productive and wrongheaded. Instead, critical openness needs to be rediscovered in the religious and cultural civilization of Islam and nurtured within Muslim communities. This means that wider society should create the spaces in which this rediscovery of critical openness can take place in a nurturing environment and for me, in practical terms, this means that Muslim communities should support but also be supported to build educational competence in terms of the provision of professional training for Muslim educators, the development of educational resources, and the transformation of pedagogic practice within Muslim religious institutions. If done in the right way, this would mean that Muslim communities could in their own terms lay claim to and nurture an internal logic of coexistence and sense of belonging in Europe.

In order to create the spaces for internal educational competence that promote critical openness, all Europeans, Muslim or otherwise, need to acknowledge the presence of Islam as a cultural given in Europe. What is really crucial is how we Europeans, Muslim or otherwise, come to terms with this reality. It is easy to say but harder and more discomfiting to do than we might think. Perhaps the first step is to face up to and critically reflect upon the deceptive power politics that has so far defined the general perception of Muslims in Europe. For instance, why is it that with European Muslims now in their third and fourth generations of settlement, they are still depicted as members of ethnic minorities defined by their foreignness, e.g. as Arabs, Turks, Pakistanis, etc. Why is anti-Muslim bigotry seemingly the last acceptable form of prejudice in Europe today? Why do many Muslims in Europe today refuse, in the name of being loyal to their cultural and religious heritage, to acknowledge and embrace their European identities? Why have Muslim communities across Europe been so slow to face up the major challenges of extremism and reactionary conservatism that have emerged in the years after 9/11?

It is understandable and indeed perfectly legitimate that Muslims like other citizens use their democratic rights to express their anger and genuine grievances over the alarmingly negative perceptions of Islam in Europe and to protest against what they see as ethically indefensible foreign policies and interventions in the Muslim world by European powers. However, these genuine grievances are all-too-often used to ignore and excuse rigid and even extreme interpretations of Islam that marginalise critical openness and through their impact on the tenor of public opinion endanger the sense of secure belonging in Europe. We European Muslims are currently dealing with a situation where we have to explain ourselves constantly and make an extra effort to regain the confidence and trust of wider society. Yet even in this circumstance, many Muslim community activists are trying to model their religious and cultural institutions on mother institutions based in their countries of origin in an attempt to ensure the continuity of homeland religious identities among young European Muslims. Unfortunately, mosques, madrasas (supplementary schools for children’s Islamic studies) and dar al-`ulums (seminaries where imams are trained) largely operate without reflecting critically on their radically different context in Europe. To support this foreclosed mindset that refuses to engage in an Islamically-meaningful way, significant power politics is exercised within Muslim communities to tightly define the agency of young Muslims by insisting upon the replication of narratives and identities borrowed from their countries of origin. However, this stymies the emergence of competent Muslim faith leadership that is capable of integrating the Islamic and European elements of their life experiences through a process of intelligent dialogue to develop a mature synthesis and these conservative power brokers not only fail to invest in this urgently needed alternative but even see it as a threat to their position. Yet, without this new competent Islamic leadership in Europe, the rapidly-changing needs of her Muslim communities can hardly be identified let alone addressed.
As I argued earlier, without a genuine willingness among all the relevant stakeholders to exercise critical openness it is unrealistic to expect a mature Islamic sense of belonging in Europe to emerge. Muslims cannot simply demand recognition of their legal rights and their pre-existing conservative and, in some cases, radicalized religious identities without demonstrating that they are serious about their civic and cultural responsibilities within the secular and multicultural societies of Europe. Similarly, European societies and their governments cannot reasonably expect Muslims to embrace the ideals of secular modernity by simply granting them formal legal recognition as citizens yet try to micromanage the development of Muslim communities through coercive or hostile means which plays into the power politics in these communities that I mentioned above.

These mutually exclusive expectations have severely hindered a meaningful and creative process of intercultural dialogue between Islam and Europe, by which I mean that the stakeholders are prepared to be redefined by this encounter. In other words, Muslims have to realise that their identities, particularly those of young Muslim people, must reflect the contextual reality of living in a diverse, secular democratic Europe. At the same time, Europe must come to terms with fact that its historical experience of managing religious diversity in the past should be revisited while engaging with Islam in order to implement its key principle of religious freedom effectively in order to better achieve social cohesion.

There are at least three models of democratic secularity in Europe that are addressing the minority Muslim presence: (1) the so-called ‘French separationist’ model, although in practice across Europe, the religion-state separation is really only a matter of degree, even in France; (2) the ‘established religion’ model, e.g. in the Scandinavian states, Britain and Greece; and (3) the ‘positive accommodation’ model for multi-confessional states, e.g. in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Stephan 2011).

In each of these three European models, the concept of secularity has played a crucial role but it has been interpreted and applied differently. As Europe strove to leave behind her medieval, intolerant and often bloody religious sectarianism, it did not do away with religion altogether. On the contrary, as I discussed elsewhere (Sahin 2011) secularity is an essential aspect of Western modernity and a central principle that underpins democracy, fostering the inclusion of religious difference and protecting religious freedom. It ensures state neutrality towards the diverse religious identities of its citizens and protects the rights of those who wish not to be involved with any organized religion. Each European nation, depending on its own cultural particularity, has accommodated their own religious traditions and institutions so that they continue to play an important role overall within Europe’s cultural and civic life. In general, as religious authority in Christianity has been embodied within the Church, European secular democracies have reached accommodations with one or more established churches and have largely conceived of secularity in denominational, institutional and, above all, Christian terms.

It is still puzzlingly underappreciated that the development of Islamic religious authority over time has never been completely embodied in any church-like institution. Therefore, as a result, European states have found it difficult to deal with the seemingly conflicting demands of different Muslim communities and the amorphous character of spiritual and religious authority in Islam. There is a prevalent expectation that European Muslims should come up with a national church-like structure of authority that secular state could negotiate with respect to their social, educational, cultural and religious demands. Yet, despite this structural difficulty, European democratic secularity retains the potential of offering an inclusive way to justly accommodate religious identities, even if none of these three models compare as favourably in terms of accommodating and recognizing religious minorities when compared with some states outside of Europe that practise the ‘respect all, positive cooperation, principled distance’ model in what have been societies with a higher degree of religious diversity than those found in Europe (Stephan 2011).
However, secularity’s principle of inclusion has increasingly been side-lined by an aggressive atheistic ideology, which I choose to call secularism (Sahin 2011), which insists upon no public space for religion. In short, the above-mentioned European models have largely failed to accommodate Muslim needs justly or to allow Islam to become integrated organically into Europe. And, at the same time, there is not enough willingness among Muslims to interpret the meaning of being European while retaining their faith identities. There are now increasing state-sponsored attempts in continental Europe to create a ‘Muslim church’ artificially as a means to achieve social integration quickly. Unified Muslim platforms have either been created from the top-down or encouraged and endorsed as grassroots developments, albeit with decidedly mixed results. Some European states have rushed to open Muslim theological training institutions in emulation of their existing denominational system to create a European Islamic religious authority. Unfortunately, no matter how well intended, these attempts remain politically motivated initiatives that are often shaped both by political populism and by the religious and foreign policy ambitions of some Muslim countries or movements who want a decisive role in shaping European Muslim identities in their own image.

As a Muslim educator, I am acutely aware of our need to reflect critically upon the kind of religious subjectivities we wish to nurture within our European Muslim communities. My longitudinal empirical research with Muslim young people and their religious leaders in the UK (Sahin 2013) shows that formal and informal Muslim educational institutions still overwhelmingly reproduce foreclosed religiousities that are unfortunately not interested in and often incapable of rethinking Islam within the context of Europe. It should be stressed that this rethinking process cannot be confined to a simplistic legal hermeneutics, usually structured around the concept of the ‘aims of shari’ah’ (maqasid al-shari’ah) that seems to be guiding most of today’s so-called ‘reformist’ Muslim projects. These attempts largely reflect the efforts of the transnational Islamic renewal movements that have originated in different parts of Muslim world and are, therefore, less interested in engaging with the contextual reality of Muslims in Europe. Most crucially, most of the reformist projects are less willing to engage critically with the Islamic legacy, which is a key requirement to facilitate the emergence of an Islamically-meaningful sense of belonging in Europe.

Muslim faith and community leaders need to realize that the challenges of living in Europe are and will be experienced primarily by their youth. Muslim young people are being pushed to adopt uncritically or assimilate the norms of a secular society or to retreat into the comfort of an idealised and rigid faith structure and reject wider society. The need is to restore Muslim young people’s confidence in Islam and to encourage them to interpret their presence in Europe creatively to make it Islamically meaningful. They need to be given the tools for a self-reflective theological hermeneutic competence that would allow them to integrate the rich heritage of Islamic civilization with modern European traditions of critical thought. Without such a culture of critical openness, it is difficult to envisage how a mature European expression of Islam, as well as a distinct sense of belonging to the European Muslim umma, could emerge.

The sacred heart of Islam, the Qur’an, is full of passages illustrating that faithfulness (islam/iman) should not be reduced a simplistic act of mindless obedience but should symbolise a mature integration of the human competence for spiritual devotion and critical reflection into a meaningful value system. As I have argued elsewhere in detail (Sahin 2013), the Qur’an demands that Muslims develop what can be conceptualised as an intelligent faith or critical faithfulness. Unless the Muslim community and the wider society take the Qur’an’s humanising moral imperative and educational vision seriously, the pathway towards a mature European Islam and its new collective expression, the European Muslim umma, will be difficult to realize. As such, the ‘critical spirit’ that constitutes the heart of European modernity is not a challenge to Islam per se but is an important human competence that Islam affirms, provided that it is applied in the spirit of upholding human dignity and justice for all. Today, perhaps more than ever, we all need to nurture the spirit of critical openness in our own
munities so that we can relate responsibly to one another and gradually bring about meaningful coexistence in Europe.

References

