

## THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN WESTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO ASSESS THE FREEDOM OF RELIGION BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AND CERTAIN COMMUNITIES OF PEOPLE IN EUROPE. ALSO, IT ANALYSES THE PATTERNS AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF STATE-RELIGION RELATIONSHIPS IN THE EU COUNTRIES, FOCUSING ON THE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES NOT ONLY IN THE WESTERN EUROPE, BUT ALSO IN THE BALKANS. NOWADAYS, EUROPE FACES AN AMPLE AND COMPLEX PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTION, WHICH IS GUIDED AND SUPPORTED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION. INITIATED ON ECONOMIC GROUNDS, IT HAS MANAGED TO SOLIDIFY ITSELF AND PRODUCE AN INTERCONNECTION OF A VERY EFFICIENT LEVEL, ESPECIALLY IN THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND EVEN MILITARY FIELDS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WITHIN THE CULTURAL FIELD, MANY OF THE EFFORTS OF THE EU AUTHORITIES MOVING TOWARDS THIS AREA. IN TERMS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE ETHNO-RELIGIOUS FACTOR, IT IS WIDELY BELIEVED THAT EUROPE IS CURRENTLY FACING TWO MAJOR CHALLENGES: FIRST OF ALL, THE PERSISTENCE OF VARIOUS ETHNIC OR RELIGIOUS CRISES AND CONFLICTS, AND THE SECOND, THE PROBLEM OF ISLAM. THE TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE STATE AND ALSO THE PROBLEMS RAISED BY THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE MODERN EUROPE, ARE ONLY A FEW OF THE SUBJECTS THAT ARE BEING ANALYZED.*

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**KEY WORDS:** ISLAM, BALKANS, EUROPE, IMMIGRANTS, SHARIA

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Europe faces an ample and complex process of construction, which is guided and supported by the European Union. Initiated on economic grounds, it has managed to solidify itself and produce an interconnection of a very efficient level, especially in the economic, political and even military fields, but at the same time within the cultural field as well, many of the efforts of the EU authorities moving towards this area.

The cultural problem seems to have a higher degree of complexity, because diversity is seen as one of the main strengths of the contemporary Europe. The European identity is becoming more complex, with its ability to tolerate the significance of cultural diversity. This fact proves the existence of certain values that Europeans cherish, with regard to their ideas about personality, democracy, justice and social equality, freedom and human rights, that are very well defined.<sup>2</sup>

For obvious reasons, sometimes reality contradicts this assertion, making the idea of a European cultural identity implausible, but what is sure is that there is a legacy of a continent based on historical experience, which is visible today in the European values. Perhaps there is no single integrated European culture, but what there is for sure, is a European heritage. Common experiences

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<sup>2</sup> See Flavius Cristian Mărcău, "Security as a determining factor of quality of life in a state from an insecure regional area," *Analele Universității „Constantin Brâncuși” din Târgu - Jiu*, nr. 4/2015, Seria Litere și Științe Sociale, Editura „Academica Brâncuși”, 77-85.

of European history, even if they have not influenced Europeans in the same way, existed and were recognized by many of those located outside the European area. Even if linguistic, religious and political borders, divide Europe's countries at the same time, they are united by the common values and heritage that facilitated the creation and functionality of very efficient common institutions.

It is well known that the foundation of the EU started in the Western cultural area and later on, many countries from the South-Eastern Europe joined. The East versus West differentiation at a European level is not recent at all, actually it has been here since the Great Schism in 1054, also called the East-West Schism, that divided the Chalcedonian Christianity into the Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. More recently, during the previous century's Cold War, there had been an even stronger differentiation on geopolitical and geostrategic grounds. The collapse of the communist system together with the USSR, led to a transfer of the disputes towards the cultural area. The Eastern Europe, former space of a soviet influence is characterized by a strong cultural diversity, both ethnic and religious, which leads to an increase in the complexity of the situation in Europe. It is more than obvious that the relationships between the East and West need to be redefined, so that Europe will not be facing a clash of civilizations.<sup>3</sup>

In the European context, religion and security as areas of interest represent a big concern for the European Union in building an area of freedom, security and justice. Thus, freedom of religion is a fundamental right for all Europeans and together with the other fundamental rights and freedoms, it is ensured by the Common Security and Defense Policy of the EU, while the European security is addressing the individual and in particular, the rights and fundamental freedoms of the individual. Achieving an area of freedom, security and justice was and is one of the main objectives of the European Union, established in the Treaty of Amsterdam.

In terms of the influence of the ethno-religious factor, it is widely believed that Europe is currently facing two major challenges: first of all, the persistence of various ethnic or religious crises, conflicts, and the second, the problem of Islam. The types of relationships developed between the church and the state and the problems raised by the Islamic communities within the modern Europe are only a few of the subjects analyzed.

The state-church relationship in Europe evolved gradually since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the church was financially supported as compensation to the fact that their assets were nationalized by the state. At that time, there was a high emphasis on the historical importance of churches, but later on, especially after the end of World War I, the efforts of the states were directed towards developing cooperative relationships with a multitude of actors of the social life. More than 50 years ago, when the Council of Europe elaborated the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, it included the freedom of religion, as a common basis instrument in terms of human rights for the member states and all of the candidate countries.

### **THE ISLAMIC ISSUE IN EUROPE**

The predominant influence of Christianity in Europe is beyond doubt. Equally obvious are the trends towards pluralism in the EU history. While the first six countries that joined in 1957 belonged more or less to the Catholic branch of Christianity, the UK and Denmark in 1973 and Sweden and Finland in 1995 brought reformed elements. Adding Greece in 1981 broadened the branch of the Orthodox Christian church, segment that increased by the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. Pluralism trends do not occur only in the bosom of Christianity, but also more broadly. Islam, for example, has become a constant in the social reality of European societies. The aspects of the state-church relationships are perceived differently by the member states of the EU, in terms of guaranteeing fundamental rights – not only as a requirement of law in a national context, but also being covered by the EU as a supranational institution, exercising powers that can directly affect not only individuals, but associations as well.

Constitutions of the Western European countries, create some sort of a balance in the state-church and religion-law relations. For example, the Irish system of organizational and financial

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<sup>3</sup> See Flavius Cristian Mărcău, "Central and Eastern Europe – necessary stages of democracy construction," *Research and Science Today* 2(8)/2014, November 2014, 93-102.

separation of the church and state, compensates for the strong position of the church in the Irish society. In addition, financial relations in Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany go hand in hand with the organizational independence, guaranteeing the autonomy of the church. Finally, Spain and Italy are combining guarantees for minority churches with guarantees for the majority church, the Catholic Church being an expression of social reality.

Since the Iranian revolution in the late '70s, the issue of Islam and the challenges that the West is facing, have become of great interest to the international community. The unrecorded increase in the numbers of registered Muslim communities in the European space transformed Islam into the second religion in number of followers in Europe, after Christianity. The debate on the status of EU members added another important issue related to Islam, namely, whether a country with a Muslim majority of the total population could be part of the European identity. Moreover, the accession or willingness to accede to the European structures of many countries in South-Eastern Europe could bring within the EU countries with Muslim majority populations or with a significant percentage of Muslim population.

This raises the following question: is Islam an integrated part of an evolving cultural environment in Europe, or is it a threat to the European society? Representations of Islam have a strong influence on the political culture, national identities and on attitudes towards migration, security and multiculturalism. To answer this question, in this paper there will be analyzed both the challenges posed by the presence of Muslim communities existing in Europe and the phenomenon of immigration of the Muslim population.

For a start, in order to get a better understanding of the facts exposed, there is a distinction between Islam and Islamism. Islamism, also called political Islam in literature, is a political theology, an analysis and critique of political arrangements in a religious perspective.<sup>4</sup> It can be also defined as the interpretation and use of religion for political purposes, but regardless of the definition adopted, Islamism, although it has its connections with Islam, is different from it, the main difference being that Islamism is a political ideology and Islam is a religion. If Islamism can be characterized as issues centered on the social life, Islam consists mainly of transcendental religious teachings. However, any spiritual experience would be meaningless if it could not be exploited through actions, which obviously imply interactions with individuals or groups of people. From this point of view, each religion can be considered a critical reflection on politics.<sup>5</sup> Islamism is just a particular interpretation of Islam and it would be a major error to consider the religion as a problem per se, comparable to terrorism, for example. Islam is not terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic, not a religion but an ideology, or rather the result of it. Another difficult aspect is the diversity in the characteristics of ethnic, linguistic and cultural needs of Muslim communities in Europe, plus the multitude of nodal points of the network that links them to other significant regions and the strong or majority presence of the Islamic communities.

There is a big diversity of characteristics of Muslim communities in Europe and their relationships with host countries belonging to various European national contexts. Amiraux<sup>6</sup> pointed out while studying the cases of France and Germany, that there are remarkable differences regarding the academic and political attitudes towards the Muslim communities established on the territories of both of the states mentioned.

It is necessary to identify two distinct categories of Muslim populations, differentiated by a number of significant factors, such as socio-economic and cultural factors: Muslim communities in Western Europe, especially the EU member states and Muslim communities in the Balkans. Differences between the two types are based on their relation to the state of origin, for example, while in Western Europe, a significant number of members of Muslim communities are migrants in their second or third generation. Muslim populations in the Balkans are indigenous, a situation made possible by historical conditions, due to the former dominance of large parts of the Balkan area by the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>4</sup> Cavannaugh, W. T. & Scott, P., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, (Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford and Carlton, 2004), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Cavannaugh, W. T. & Scott, P., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*

<sup>6</sup> Amiraux, V., *Transnational political Islam: religion, ideology and power*, (Pluto Press, London, 2004), 28-57.

While most of the Muslims in Western Europe are located in urban areas or in the suburbs of urban areas, in the Balkans, Muslim communities are located mainly in rural areas. From a cultural standpoint, it can be observed that Balkan Muslims are, in most cases, native speakers of the language of the host state. It should also be considered that Muslims in the Balkans were and still are part of a political context mostly dominated by its distinctive ethnic and nationalist characteristics.

### **MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE BALKANS**

When referring to Muslim communities in the Balkans or the Balkan Islam, the diversity of these communities needs to be taken into consideration. Located in this region since the Ottoman presence that began, during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, after a process of Islamization that lasted until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these communities can be characterized as being far from homogeneous.

This cultural heterogeneity essentially has obvious ethnic and linguistic foundations. The dominant linguistic groups are the speakers of Slavic, Albanian, Turkish and Romani. These language groups are in turn divided ethnically and nationally, predominantly between Albanians, Bosnians, Turks and Pomaks.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the religious criterion, most of the Balkan Muslims are followers of the Sunni doctrine, derived from the Hanafi<sup>8</sup> school branch, including the Bektashi and Alevi minorities.

Most Balkan Muslim communities are living in rural environments and working in agriculture. Population movements in recent decades have reduced the Christian population in rural areas, because they preferred urban environments, which, along with the growth of the population in Muslim communities, resulted in an ethnic homogenization in certain regions such as Kosovo, Western Macedonia, the Sanjak region and the region of the Rhodope Mountains. The urban Muslim communities virtually disappeared from the Eastern Balkans, especially in Bulgaria and Greece, because of their migration to Istanbul and Anatolia. Romania could be an exception in this respect, because here the Muslim population is predominantly located in its urban areas.

In the Western Balkans, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and Western Macedonia, the presence of Muslim communities in urban areas were noticeable since the Ottoman Empire, but there are significant differences, between Muslim communities living in urban areas alongside other secular communities and newly urbanized rural communities, that are still deeply attached to specific religious traditions and cultural practices.<sup>9</sup>

The geographical distribution of the Muslim communities in the Balkans is not a balanced one for sure. Before the beginning of the '90s, the only Balkan state with a majority of Muslim population was Albania. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, two other majority Muslim states appeared Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Moreover, important but not majority communities of Muslims are the ones located in Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria and significantly reduced ones in Greece and Romania.<sup>10</sup>

### **MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE WESTERN EUROPE**

Except the Muslim communities from the Balkans and other East or South-East European countries, the majority of the Muslim population came to Europe starting with the '50s, most of them in the Western countries. There have been several ways in which Muslim communities were brought and developed themselves in the Western Europe:

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<sup>7</sup> Pomaks is the name given to the Bulgarian speaking Muslims (approximately 150-200,000), a smaller group of them (about 30,000) being located in the Greek region formerly called Thrace.

<sup>8</sup> Hanafi is one of the four law schools of the Sunni branch of Islam belonging. The school was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century by Abu Haneefah.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Duță, "Considerations on territorial integrity and unilateral separation", *Research and Science Today* Supplement No. 2/2014, Academica Brâncuși Publishing, Tîrgu Jiu, 2014, 143-151.

<sup>10</sup> Flavius Cristian Mărcău, „Some consideration about consolidation of democracy in postcommunist states”, *Analele Universității „Constantin Brâncuși” din Târgu - Jiu*, nr. 3/2014, Seria Litere și Științe Sociale, Editura „Academica Brâncuși”, 112-115.

- Recruiting workforce, especially through programs such as “guest workers”, very common in Europe until the mid ‘70s;
- Afterwards, through family reunification programs, of those previously recruited for labor;
- Through the establishment of the descendants of those families in the host countries, as citizens of those countries;
- Because of the post-colonial immigration – this way, a very significant number of immigrants left India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Caribbean, moving to live and work in the United Kingdom; in France, there are mostly immigrants from Morocco, Algeria and other North-African states. Unlike those in the first three categories, they were not recruited through various programs to attract labor to Western Europe, but were rather attracted by the economic factor; the economic “boom” in the ‘60s coincided with a maximum rate of post-colonial immigration;
- Another category is the one of asylum seekers or refugees, who included a large number of people originating from countries such as Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea and Afghanistan;
- Even though, significantly smaller in numbers, another category is the one of students and professionals;
- The last category is a particular part of the Muslim population that did not come to Europe with any of the immigration waves. Most often they are native citizens of a European country that have chosen to convert to Islam as a result of marriage, or seeking some form of spiritual fulfillment.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of demographics, an increased birth rate was observed among Muslim immigrants in Europe, compared to the non-Muslim birth rate. A noteworthy aspect is that around 50%<sup>12</sup> of the Muslims in Western Europe were born in the countries of this region, which adds as an additional factor in increasing Muslim population in Europe.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Muslim communities in Europe have a lower average age than the non-Muslim population.<sup>14</sup>

Another interesting aspect can be observed by comparing the political organization of Europe, having democratic institutions guaranteed by the constitution, to the organization of governance in the modern Islamic states where the Koran and Sharia Islamic law play a major role in legislation and its implementation. The current European system was able to separate their speech and religious institutions from the political and legal power, while keeping a thorough constitutional legitimacy, at a certain degree of ideological and educational power, even though, for many Muslims, the relationship between politics and religion remains a material fact, legal and constitutional in their view.

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<sup>11</sup> Holub, R., *Intellectuals and Euro-Islam*, in *Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam: Politics, Culture & Citizenship in the Age of Globalization*, edited by AlSayyad, N. & Castells, M., (Lexington Publishers, Oxford, 2002), 167-193.

<sup>12</sup> *How restive are Europe's Muslims?*, The Economist, 2001, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Caldwell, C., *The Crescent and the Tricolor*, Atlantic Monthly, 2000, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Mandaville, P., *Muslim Youth in Europe*, in *Islam, Europe's Second Religion*, edited by Hunter, T. S, Praeger, Westport, 2002, 219-230.



Figure 1: Western Europe Muslim population<sup>15</sup>

Usually, the term “Muslim” is used to refer to a group or a person coming from an Islamic cultural background. The term does not necessarily indicate a practice of any form of religion or religious behavior, even though, the group members are perceived as Muslims in the religious sense of the word by the general public. In order to clarify this aspect of perception, people from Muslim majority countries can be classified in terms of religious involvement in four categories:

- confessional – a category that includes those faithful practitioners regarding Islam, not just as a mere religion but also as a social and cultural life;
- faithful – the category that supports the religious, ethical and social principles of Islam, without following specific religious obligations;
- liberal – the category that find the ethical and philosophical aspects of Islam very valuable, while being critical or rejecting religious issues pertaining to particular socio-political areas;
- agnostics – the category of those who do not believe in acts of faith of Islam and reject religion as the basis of social and cultural life in general.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Source: islamproject.org

<sup>16</sup> Shadid, W.A.R. & van Koningsveld, P.S., *Religious Freedom and the Position of Islam in Western Europe*, (Peeters Publishers, Leuven, 1995), 60-76.

This classification is not only applicable to the Muslims in Europe, but to all of the Muslims, including those in their origin countries. According to William Montgomery Watt, an expert in medieval and early history of Islam, specializing in normative teachings of Islam as revealed in the Arabic writings, the Islamic contemporary major current is traditionally a conservative ideology. The expert mentioned above, identified five aspects:<sup>17</sup>

- it promotes the concept of a still unchanged world, both religiously and socially;
- Islam is perceived as a complete religion, which includes all necessary moral and religious truths of the human race until the end of time;
- it perpetuates the idea of inevitable conflict between the “dar al-Islam”<sup>18</sup> and “dar al-harb”<sup>19</sup>, which will result in an Islamic takeover;
- assigns a high degree of self-sufficiency of Islam;
- idealization of Mohammed and early Islam.

For an effective integration of the Muslim communities, the policies adopted and implemented by policy makers must consider specific sensitive issues such as religion, law and education, to the extent that they can strongly influence the dimensions of national security, the socio-economic, the cultural and the political environments. When considering their integration, with regard to the compatibility or incompatibility of the values of Islam compared to the European values in many countries, the relationship between local people and immigrants was marked by cultural conflicts, including those highlighting the symbols of Islam. In most of the cases, the rituals, habits or traditions are undergoing a process of change, the main reason being that their performance should consider two legal systems that were not always compatible: the Islamic faith and the legal system of the host country.

A significant example for this matter is the hijab clothing and the debates on this issue, especially in countries like France, Germany and Turkey. Although regarded as a symbol of religiosity, the hijab clothing was perceived by some segments of the host countries societies, especially by the liberal feminists, as a sign of oppression of women. In this case and also when considering the building of mosques in Western societies, there must be some boundaries and a certain balance between individual and collective rights.

Legislation is an important factor of the integration of Muslim communities in the society of the host state. For this purpose, all of the aspects related to legal recognition practices associated with religion or religious tradition must be considered, especially the laws of Islamic origin. At a European level, there were voices who proposed the authorization and exploration of ways to harmonize the Sharia Islamic law and European legislation, where necessary. There is the case of the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose affirmation reveals that the adoption of some aspects of Islamic Sharia law seems an unavoidable solution for the future, in order to maintain a strong social cohesion.<sup>20</sup> This attitude, coming from a high church of the UK, represents a strong signal that the application of Islamic law is already present, informally, within Muslim communities. It must be a signal of the need for legislative harmonization in line with the realities of the European society, in order to avoid the appearance of a parallel legislative network.

From the educational point of view, the main aspect of this area is passing on the knowledge and values, including the religious ones. This covers the segment of preschool and school, as well as the one of adults, involving courses of theological and religious education, or extracurricular and informal education, through the media.

If nowadays, the Muslim exodus will carry on the same as in the previous couple of years, we may soon be calling our continent Eurabia instead of Europe. The European Union has allowed itself to succumb to the interests of the Arab world. The demand for oil, the predilection of the European citizens to host foreigners and the willingness to counterweight the US powers are coming from the

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<sup>17</sup> Watt, W.M., *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, Routledge, London & New York, 1988, pp. 88-123.

<sup>18</sup> “dar al-harb”, translated as the territory of war, is the name for the regions where Islam is not as dominant and therefore the divine will is not observed.

<sup>19</sup> By contrast, “dar al-Islam”, translated as the territory of peace, represents those territories where Islam is dominant and where the submission to God is the most important thing.

<sup>20</sup> *Sharia Law in UK is ‘unavoidable’*, BBC News, 2008, 1.

roots of anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism and hatred against the US. There is a massive threat not only to Israel, but to the survival of Europe's Christian majority, as it is now. The exodus of refugees has reached unprecedented numbers in modern times. Countries like Macedonia, for example, came to be transited by thousands refugees, mainly Syrians and Iraqis, on their way to the countries of Northern Europe. And their number is expected to still increase in the future. The flow of emigrants via the Balkans increased significantly and the situation in Greece deteriorated rapidly after the avalanche arrivals from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The differences between groups of European Muslims continue to play an important role in the mosques and associations in Europe. It is also important to admit that the presence of Muslims is an unfinished and unequal process. It is an ongoing process and it concerns all social realities. The integration of Islamic communities in Europe is unfinished, leaders are rare, the ruling class is about to be established and the population is still about to take possession of their rights in the European public areas, many of which are fragile because of the difficulty to entry into the labor market.

There is no single European model of the religion-state relationship. This type of relationship cannot be identified in a homogeneous form, because there are differences from state to state. The trends for religious freedom are common, but the mutual independence of religion and state must be combined with cooperation and support. There is no unified legal system regarding the religion-state relationship in Europe, although, due to the EU enlargement, the European law becomes increasingly more important to all member states.

However, Europe's future depends largely on how different cultures and religions will manage to coexist within the European Union and neighboring regions, particularly those of the Arab world and the Islamic world. This conclusion is supported by the historical lesson of the last decades, which proved that the religious dimension of human influence on the individual or groups behavior in varying degrees, was most often measured on the scale of bloody violence.

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Dănuț Duță, "Crisis analysis parameters", *Research and Science Today* No. 2/2014, Academica Brâncuși Publishing, Tîrgu Jiu, 2014, 80-93.



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