



Hakan Yılmaz and Çağla E. Aykaç (Eds.)

Perceptions of Islam in Europe: Culture, Identity and Muslim 'Other'

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On 7 January 2015, two Islamist gunmen forced their way into the Paris headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and opened fire, killing twelve people and wounding eleven. Beyond a doubt, the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was a criminal act, but there were also ideological motivations behind the attack which must be noted if we want to avoid generalized theories and simplistic explanations that blame a 'clash of civilizations' or 'cultural conflict'. Such paradigms, in which violence and extremism are seen to be inherent aspects of Islam, position it as a ground for 'breeding terrorism'. In those terms, Islam is seen as a religion based on extreme fanaticism which can be activated at the slightest provocation. The danger of such approach is that it overlooks the fact that terrorist and militant acts are not just the products of religious doctrines, but of political and economic conditions as well.

In light of those recent events, *Perceptions of Islam in Europe*, a collection of essays by leading European scholars, is timelier than ever. Hakan Yılmaz and Çağla E. Aykaç edited the volume, which explores interactions between Islam and Europe and proposes alternative ways to accommodate Muslims and Islam in European political and cultural systems. The first part of the book provides theoretical accounts and the second part deals with case studies. These studies move beyond the kinds of descriptive account which simply report on the problems that Muslim communities face in Europe.

The book's contributors present interesting, well-formulated, and thought-provoking research. They make important theoretical advances, while also exploring issues that at times reveal contradictions. Gerard Delanty opens the volume's theoretical section by suggesting that any rethinking of the nature of the relationship between Europe and Islam requires a re-evaluation of our perceptions of history. Delanty convincingly challenges the dominant perception of European modernity, which tends to gloss over the role that Islam played in the unfolding of Europe's history and formation. He suggests that, taking that role into consideration, we ought to rethink Europe through Islam. In the next essay, Deniz Kandiyoti returns to the problematic issue of essentialism in relation to religion, and, from the perspective of gender, poses the question: 'What are the stakes around defining Muslims in Europe as religious subjects?' (p. 34). She concludes that these stakes are too high for everyone in Europe and beyond and especially for women in minority communities. In a complex scenario in which various players are at odds over different political projects, a focus on religion alone both limits our perspectives and creates formidable obstacles.

The chapter written by Stephanos Pasmazoglu deals with nine interrelated and overlapping paradoxes, including liberal-democratic, culturalist, and strategic problematics. He discusses those constructions of European identity which have been affected by the use and abuse of Islam for specific political and ideological agendas (p. 29). However, for Pasmazoglu a double and multiple policy which has remained dominant down to the present day makes it impossible to 'rethink' both Europe and Islam. In the next chapter, Jeffrey Haynes examines the issue of Islam and globalisation and asks, 'How does globalisation change our



understanding of Islam?’ Through this discussion, Haynes presents the challenges and opportunities inherent in that relationship. The final chapter of the theoretical section of the book, written by Sia Anagnostopoulou, deals with interrelations between Islam and the Ottoman Empire on the one hand, and Greece and Cyprus on the other. This is an issue which has not received the attention it deserves, and Anagnostopoulou offers up thought-provoking analyses, skilfully exploring the instrumentalisation of religion and its appropriation by various interested parties (Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, and the great imperialist powers). She cites this instrumentalisation as the main factor driving the creation of identity in the region, and she examines concerns around this issue which were invoked in the transition from empire to nation-state in the fulfilment of the countries’ respective political agendas.

The second section of the book begins with a chapter on the European Union (EU) written by Çağla E. Aykaç. Taking up the issue of discrimination, Aykaç challenges the ways in which Islam is seen in the EU and poses the essential question at the core of the issue at hand; she argues that if we want to move ahead, first and foremost we must ask ‘whether and how the European Union “thinks” about itself in relation to Muslims and Islam’ (p. 89). She identifies a series of issues that have proven to be highly problematic, such as a tendency to emphasise religion, culture, racism, immigration, security, and xenophobia. The rest of the essays include a case study of Poland contributed by Katarzyna Gorak-Sosnowska, a study of Germany by Gerdien Jonker, an analysis of the Netherlands by Welmoet Boender, an examination of Great Britain and Italy by Sara Silvestri, and lastly a case study of Turkey by Kenan Çayir. The wide range of issues discussed allows the collection to question and challenge dominant paradigms in all of these countries. The essays deal with a number of complex issues, such as the way Islam is imagined in German textbooks and debates about the training of imams in the Netherlands. These chapters help to provide a comparative perspective which gives readers a fuller account of the processes and modes of encounters between Europe and Islam.

Although there are some weaknesses of language in some of the essays, these do not detract from the core arguments and the book is highly readable. While the essays approach the issue of Islam and Europe from different perspectives, they complement each other in a compelling manner, and the theoretical and case study sections of the book interact very successfully. Together, they demonstrate the legacy of centuries of European-Islamic interaction, and the (in)compatibility of Islamic and European values; they also put in front of Europe one of the most crucial questions it faces: will Europe in future adhere to its political-legal values or its cultural-religious values?

There is no doubt that the book will stimulate further debate and analyses, and it is one of those rare publications that makes a significant contribution to the heated and ongoing debates prevalent today. Given that the whole debate over Islam takes place in relation to Europe, one would think that there would be a common, united approach to the issue of Islam within it. However, what we notice – and this becomes evident, implicitly or explicitly, as the book progresses – is that the issue of Islam is and remains firstly a national concern, and is only secondarily a European issue. This collection helpfully illustrates this paradigm,



and, although it is perhaps not one of its primary concerns and is not mentioned outright, it forces us to reconsider the issue of Islam from a European Union perspective. In light of current events, all interested parties, and especially policymakers, would do well to consult the book before making political decisions that will have far-reaching ramifications. This major work is highly recommended for professionals and a general audience interested in Europe, Islam, secularism, gender, integration, multiculturalism, imperialism, assimilation, and globalization.

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