

## **Introduction**

Europe has long remained a homogenous religious society. Especially in Western Europe, the population has historically consisted mostly of Christians. In Europe, there has been a gradual drift towards secularism, but Europe has greatly avoided the influence of other outside religions, and has maintained Christianity as a historical background. With the recent migration of people from parts of Africa and the Middle East into Europe, there is a new interface forming for interaction between Christian/secular culture and Islam. There have been varied political reactions to this phenomena. Some want to welcome more migrants, while others have adopted anti-immigrant stances, for reasons of religion, security, and economics. Many Europeans feel that their identity is threatened by the increasing presence of Islam in their population. Such perceived threats make acceptance of Muslims difficult. Meaningful religious dialogue in Europe requires flexibility of both traditional Islam and traditional Europe. Muslim immigrants are largely adapting their beliefs, practices, and leadership to fit their new context. However, such evolution is not sufficient for integration into European society. It is also necessary for Europe to rethink certain systems, including European identity and secularism to foster integration and fruitful dialogue between religions.

## **The Situation in Europe**

Europe has generally remained a homogenous society with Christian roots, yet not entirely. Muslims have historically had a small presence as a native population in Europe, partially due to the historical presence Ottoman empire. While native Muslims have had a longer presence in Europe, “it is both the larger size of immigrant Muslim populations and their politically and culturally contested presence that have come to be the focal points of public and political discourses as well as policies for addressing Muslim claims” (Triandafyllidou 14). The recent rise of immigration has made Europeans much more aware of Islam’s presence in their shared space, and this presence has caused concern.

In the west, “The post 9/11 political climate has invigorated the urge to monitor everything that is done by Muslims” (Sunier 2012). There is an uneasiness in Europe, out of fear of Islamic radicalization, which may sometimes translate into Islamophobia (Dassetto et. al). With an increasing frequency of terrorist attacks across Europe, there is increasing suspicion of the Islamic religion as a whole. In addition to fears about radical Islam, there are many other political concerns surrounding migration in Europe such as a desire for cultural integrity, and the unwillingness to carry the economic burden of migrants. Current European attitudes create a climate that is difficult for religious dialogue, even though the interface between Muslims and those of other religions (mostly Christian traditions) is growing.

## **Muslim Adaptation**

Literature on Muslim immigrants in Europe emphasizes their adaptive strategies in order to practice their religion effectively in a new culture and context, especially among younger generations. Their adaptation can be broken into three realms: beliefs, practices and leadership.

## *Beliefs*

In many of the countries of origin of Muslim migrants to Europe, religious beliefs and cultural beliefs are closely intertwined. Therefore, the movement to a different culture often prompts a re-evaluation of the meaning of certain religious beliefs. Dassetto *et. al* describes five different lines of Islamic belief systems, which are: literalist, conservative-institutional, neo-reformist, postmodern spiritualization, and lay Islam (Dassetto *et. al* 2007). The most common system globally is the literalist system, which is more traditional and holds to the purity of Islamic teaching. However, in Europe, and among young Muslims especially, the theory of postmodern spiritualization is becoming more popular. This line of thought presents Islam as a religion of choice, and a religion that can be self-interpreted. Islam does not have to rely entirely on traditional dogma. This theory also divorces Islam as a religious practice from any system of government (Dassetto *et. al* 2007). Europe is an experimental ground for the Muslim faith. In France, Islam is becoming individualized, which means, “the believer decides autonomously which elements of Islam (s)he considers to be binding or not” (Peter 2006). Outside of traditional Islamic cultures, a significant number of young Muslims are taking their own interpretations of the faith that their parents held so rigidly to. The meaning and beliefs of Islam are growing to fill the new spaces the religion has come to occupy in Europe.

## *Practices*

Not only are frameworks of belief beginning to shift in Europe, the practice of Islam, or what Islam looks like in everyday life, is changing as well. Traditional practices outlined in Islam include prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, sacrificial feast, etc. (Dassetto *et. al* 2007). In Europe, some of these practices are being reimagined. For example, concerning prayer, some

still hold to the practice of praying five times a day, but many others have adapted practices of prayer that are more accommodating to their environment, as European society does not traditionally support the schedule of daily prayer. This shift in practice is more common among young people. It is estimated by Marchal *et al.* that the traditional method of these practices only applies to, “on average a third of potential adult Muslims of the first generation, and perhaps only a fifth of young people” (Dassetto *et. al* 2007). As Muslims struggle to fit their traditional practice into an entirely new space and culture, some simply change their practice. Without giving up on their religion, Muslim immigrants are changing the way they practice their religion in their daily life, in order to more fully embrace their new context.

### *Leadership*

Leadership of the Muslim body is also different in Europe than it is in many places of the world where there are majority-Muslim native populations. The traditional practice of Islam has found its locus within the infrastructure of mosques. However, there is a decline in the role that mosques play among younger generations in Europe (Peter 2006). This is likely a consequence of shifting Muslim beliefs (towards the postmodern spiritualization discussed previously). As more Muslims begin to view religion as an individual endeavor, there is less focus on traditional religious structures of authority. Additionally, the communal make-up of mosques is radically different in Europe than it is in countries with large Muslim populations. The traditional framework of a mosque was based in familial and communal networks, which do not exist in Europe. “A considerable number of young people no longer go to ordinary ethnicity based mosques” (Sunier 2012). Mosques in Europe consist of populations of broad ethnic diversity.

Some find it more difficult to build community in this less unified setting. Consequently, mosques are becoming less of an obligatory center of the Muslim religion in Europe.

In conjunction with a decline in the role of mosques in the lives of European Muslims, there is a decline in the presence of authoritative imams. However, there is room for some new forms of Islamic leadership in Europe, such as preachers, a diversification of religious authority (Peter 2006). Preachers tend to be less traditional and emphasize the style of their teaching, as opposed to imams who are selected more exclusively for their expertise. Sunier describes this as a shift from a representative religious leadership to a performative style of leadership (Sunier 2012). This “performative” style of leadership is another way that Islam is adapting to fit a more European context, where society more commonly values presentation over substance. Behind these shifts in leadership lies a deeper question about authority among Muslims in Europe. For young migrants, the process of migration has, “unsettled the social texture from which Muslims migrated. This has led to a critical attitude among second generation Muslims in Europe towards the ‘Islam of their parents’ and religious authority” (Sunier 2012). Many European migrants question the authority of their religious leaders altogether, including their parents. This may be due to the realization that there are other ideas to explore, and a desire to distance themselves from their previous culture. This “rebellion” against religious leaders likely contributes to the decreasing importance of central authority. The move to Europe has caused some Islamic communities to shift leadership styles, and many Muslims to question religious authority altogether.

*Summary*

Muslim migrants in Europe have considered the ways that their religion might adapt and change to fit a new context. These changes may be both practical and theological, and they show that Islam is actively attempting to engage with European culture. Many Muslims desire to integrate their religious and cultural customs with their life in a new land, and this process involves questioning belief, practice, and leadership.

### **Possible European Shift**

In Europe there is an expressed desire, by both individuals, and governments, for the integration of Muslim migrants. Integration is an essential process for bringing about stable diversity, and sets the stage for interreligious dialogue. However, there are significant challenges to this process in Europe as it exists today. These challenges are due in part to the very construction of European identity, as well as the rigid secularism of many European countries.

#### *European Identity*

The question European society is in the process of asking themselves, as they are experiencing an influx of foreigners wanting to make a place in their society, is: what does it truly mean to be European? The crux of the debate lies in part of the title of Caldwell's book: *Can Europe be the same with different people in it?* (Sunier 2012). Many believe that it can not. This is a real challenge for those entering Europe with intentions to become a part of society there. While Europe is largely secular, many still claim that their Christian history is essential to their European identity. Muslims cannot, "claim a Europeanness- as the inhabitants of Christian Europe can" (Asad 165). Strangely, a belief system that is no longer commonly practiced, is still considered a necessary component of society.

Even beyond the question of religion, “Europe (and the nation-states of which it is constituted) is ideologically constructed in such a way that Muslim immigrants cannot be satisfactorily represented in it” (Asad 159). “Europeanness” is not based on legal status or residence, but has come to mean the acceptance of a specific set of values, ideas, and certainties. Many of these values were developed in Christian framework of western countries. It is uncommon for Muslim migrants from outside of Europe to hold the same set of values. Even if they attain the legal status that would classify them as a European, it may take many generations and ideological shifts for their lineage to be considered *truly* European. This is a difficult standard of integration, and presents problems for diversity and dialogue within European society.

### *Secularism*

Europe finds its roots in Christianity, yet over time secularism has become the prevailing philosophy. In fact, some European countries are aggressively secular in their policies. For example, in the past few years, the controversy over veiling has often taken the limelight, particularly in France. Research has shown that, “governments with strict separation of church and state tend to be intolerant vis-a-vis veiling while states having formal relations with religious organizations tend to be tolerant” (O’Brien 2016). This finding is expected. The more secular a government is (separated from religious institutions), the less likely they are to be concerned with the religious beliefs and practices of its citizens that may be the cause of discomfort to other citizens (e.g. veiling). The lack of support of many European governments for Muslim’s religious beliefs and practices, when they are already a minority in the country, can provoke

frustration and resentment towards European society. These experiences only hinder the process of integration and dialogue between religions and cultures.

Thankfully, there is a positive effect of the rigid secularism of European governments. The failure of European states to support Islamic religion and institutions has provided a unique opportunity for Christians and Muslims to collaborate. As Islam expands in Europe, “Muslim resistance has led some Christians to reevaluate the deal that they struck with the secular state and to press for a larger, even leading place for Christian heritage and belief in the public sphere” (O’Brien 2016). The growth of the rich tradition and practice of Islam, and Muslim’s demands to practice their faith publicly, has shown other faiths, including Christianity, their weakness in succumbing to secular ideology. This battle against secularism makes Christians and Muslims unlikely allies in Europe, which is an important starting point for dialogue and religious understanding.

There has been some progress towards the acceptance of religion in secular Europe. The European Union has made steps toward increased engagement with religion in governance. In 1994, the “Soul for Europe” project was created to encourage dialogue between the EU and faith communities (Silvestri 2009). More recently the initiative to include religious groups has been housed under the Group of Policy Advisors (GOPA). However, the general policy of the EU, “remains attached to a secular line of thinking at is not only distant from, but actually suspicious of, organized religion and the power of faith” (Silvestri 2009). While there has been some progress in engaging religions by governments, Silvestri seems to lack optimism for any real change in European society. However, Triandafyllidou disagrees in her book, *Muslims in 21st Century Europe*. She is inclined to believe that Europe is actually moving away from a rigid



secularism towards a framework of religious pluralism, which, “rather than doing away with the relationship between Church and States, seeks to pluralize it by incorporating new religions and new religious institutions and bodies in the formal institutions of the State” (Triandafyllidou 2010). If this move towards religious pluralism is real, and is continued, it might provide space in European society for the integration (largely meaning acceptance) of Muslim migrants.

### *Summary*

Europe as a whole has made little effort to adapt in order to accept the recent influx of Muslim migrants from other parts of the world. The very nature of European identity is deeply rooted in a Christian past. To Europeans, being “European” is not based off of legal status, or residence, but the acceptance of certain beliefs and a certain lifestyle. This places obstacles in the way of migrants attempting to discover a European identity. Additionally, the secular state tends to lack consideration for religious groups, especially minority religious groups, when making policy. However, there is some evidence that Europe is moving away from secularism towards religious pluralism, and Christians and Muslims are collaborating to push this development. This shift will make the integration of Muslim migrants more plausible, and also foster deeper religious dialogue, especially in political circles.

### **Conclusion**

Meaningful religious dialogue in Europe requires both traditional Islam and traditional Europe to adapt to each other. Muslim immigrants often are shifting their beliefs, practices, and leadership to fit a new context. However, such evolution is not sufficient for integration and acceptance in society. It is also necessary to rethink certain European systems, including

European identity and secularism, to allow for the inclusion of Muslim migrants, and to foster fruitful dialogue between religions. The modern European context can be difficult for Muslims to navigate. Islamophobia remains a challenge, and the politics surrounding immigration are incredibly inflammatory. It is in this time that we must consider the paths forward to creating a diverse European society where there can be both harmony and dialogue. The growing interface between Muslims and Christian/secular society presents an opportunity to practice interreligious dialogue and develop a model for use in many societies where Muslims and Christians interact in a much more dangerous and explosive context. Europe can become the foundation for adaptation and innovation in order to build a bridge across religious difference.

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