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**Common Christian Values: Islam in Europe?**

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In this paper, we will address quite broad a question: can Islam coexist with European values? What are the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of European Space? Are there any, and if there are: are they universal to all of Europe?

We have chosen to focus on this topic because it is quite prevalent today. Although one might feel that we have seen the worst of the migrant crisis in 2015, we cannot possibly know whether that is true or not. We believe that it is important to focus on the similarities between Islamic and European culture and not on their differences.

Our approach will be grounded in Europe's cultural history, the idea of Europe undoubtedly has its pretensions as a value system; it has succeeded in creating itself as what it is not or, to paraphrase Edward Said, it is constantly practising a differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself. Europe defines itself by othering, but because it others within its own borders, what is the common ground for European culture? We will argue that Europe, although founded on Christian values, it no longer the Europe of Christendom. Furthermore, since Europe has been influenced by Islamic culture for centuries, mainly surviving in South-eastern Europe, we will argue that it is possible to merge Islamic and European values peacefully.

## Centuries of Islam in Europe

The main counter argument, one may be confronted with, against including Islamic culture in Europe, is that it is inherently too different to European culture. It is too foreign, un-liberal and un-democratic – generally non-European. Islam has throughout history served as one of Europe's main 'Others', manifested by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but this is rooted even deeper in history; with the Enlightenment, Europe took over the role of a universal civilisation project from Christianity. In the view of Voltaire, Montesquieu and their fellow Enlightenment thinkers, the image of a despotic East emerged in contrast to a civilised Europe. As the Islamic world in the Middle East became increasingly referred to as the Orient in the 18th century, Christian Europe became a focus for both idealism and contempt. Different discourses superimposed themselves upon one another to gradually form the image of Europe as a specific civilisation. Enlightenment and the quest for absolute knowledge was followed by a European obsession with classification. This apparatus of knowledge allowed for widely varying interpretations of the Other oscillating between contempt and esteem, between stereotypes of the barbarian and the noble savage. Such differences were pronounced during the Ottoman expansion of the Balkans in the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries, accentuating the cultural distinction between a Christian Self and a Muslim Other. Military conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and European powers mirrored Europe's own internal strife, but the ethnic and religious differences from the Turks fuelled European identity construction.<sup>1</sup>

The general preoccupation in the social sciences with the idea of identity dates from after the Second World War. Although it marks a new sense of the word, highlighting the individual's social locations and psychological crises in an increasingly uncertain world, the problem itself is far from new. Identity depends on the other's recognition of the self.<sup>2</sup>

The discourse of European identities is a symptom of anxieties about the non-European. The idea of European identity, according to Talal Asad, is 'not merely a matter of how legal rights and obligations can be reformulated. Nor is it simply a matter of how a more inclusive name can be made to claim loyalties that are attached to national or local ones. It concerns *exclusions* and the desire that those excluded recognise what is included in the name one has chosen for oneself'.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, now perhaps more than ever, Europe is describing itself by mirroring the Middle East, North Africa and Islam. The discourse of Orientalism may have changed since Said's work of 1978; it can be debated to which extent specifically the Middle East is still seen as being mysterious, feminine and weak. These days the face of Islam, for the ones who are opposing it, mostly seems to resemble the face of a young, strong man, travelling alone. But as Said also points out: the Orient is invented by the West.<sup>4</sup> The West, or in this case Europe, is responsible for making the Orient, the Islamic world, seem so alien – maybe in reality we are not so different after all.

Islam has existed in the European sphere for centuries. Whether or not the vaguely defined borders of Europe include Turkey, the predominantly Muslim influence of Turkey on Europe cannot be denied. It is of course still mostly evident when considering the Ottoman Empire and the legacy it has left in South-eastern Europe, where European Muslim communities exist today. We can argue that this is a product of a violent history, but the same can be said of the Christian Crusades for instance. In the countries, which were mostly affected by the Ottoman Empire, such as Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> Mikael af Malmbourg and Bo Stråth, 'Introduction: the National Meanings of Europe', *The Meaning of Europe*, (New York: Berg, 2002), p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Talal Asad, 'Muslims and European Identity', *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, ed. Anthony Pagden, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 211

<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, 'Muslims and European Identity', *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, ed. Anthony Pagden, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 211

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 3

communities today seem to lead quite secular lives, more influenced by other aspects of European culture, such as democracy, freedom of speech and secularism than by a strict Islamic or generally religious point of view.<sup>5</sup> Add to that the many first, second and third generation migrants from Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East who live in different countries all over Europe, it is clear to see that Europe already coexists with Islam. And since Islamic values and European values are able to go peacefully hand in hand, we would argue that these are not mutually exclusive cultures.

Another argument against the integration of Islamic cultures in Europe is that Europe already has taken a large number of migrants in and that the acceptance of more would end up leaving the (culturally) Christian Europeans as a minority. Cries of ‘Islam taking over’ can be heard from the far-right wings across Europe. Admittedly, the current migrant crisis has put pressure on the EU and most of the migrants come from predominantly Muslim countries, however, there are no reasons to believe that taking in Muslim refugees will create a Muslim majority in Europe.<sup>6</sup> And even if it did, history has shown us thus far that differences can be made in generations through cultural time lag - with time Muslim migrants would become as secularized as most Europeans.

When the report is that the Bulgarian or Bosnian Muslims seem to be very secularized, this is partly because of the fact that they exist and live in secularized Europe. Most of European religious communities’ power, admittedly with some exceptions, have been in decline for the last century or so. When second generation Muslim immigrants often are seen to be more secularized and better integrated in European communities than their parents, this can be attributed to them growing up in Europe with a focus on European values of democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

We would argue that education is one of the main factors that can impact on the secularist view of religion, which we see as crucial for any and all societies’ coexistence because a secularist outlook is less prone to differentiate on the basis of religions and could be more disposed to focusing on unity between cultures. The focus on cultural unity, between

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<sup>5</sup> Agence France Press *Bulgaria’s Muslims not deeply religious: study* (2001)  
<<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/bulgarias-muslims-not-deeply-religious-study.aspx?pageID=238&nid=8817>> [Accessed April 10 2017]

<sup>6</sup> Pamela Duncan *Europeans greatly overestimate Muslim population, poll shows* (2016)  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/society/datablog/2016/dec/13/europeans-massively-overestimate-muslim-population-poll-shows>> [Accessed April 10 2017]

European nation-states and what can be viewed as non-European cultures, is essential for peace-keeping and for the work of the European Union.

Lastly, we may encounter the argument that EU open borders and acceptance of Muslim migrants will increase the threat of terror in Europe. As has been made very clear, certain European countries are a target for terror.<sup>7</sup> While we by no means mean to undermine the tragic attacks in France, Belgium, Germany and recently Sweden amongst others, we would like to argue that terrorism is not necessarily a Muslim threat. As we unfortunately know from the 2011 Norway Attacks, terrorism in Europe can also stem from radical right-wing xenophobia. As a citizen and a resident of the Republic of Ireland, we know it can be a cause of militant nationalism. What we would like to emphasize is that the culture of Europe as a civilization and the culture of Islam are not so different that they cannot be mixed. Sadly, both can produce people who commit atrocities in the name of Islam or in the name of a Muslim-free Europe, but both Europe and Islam believe in the good in mankind, in being good to thy neighbour, and in peace. Not accepting migrants will not solve the the threat of terrorism – in fact, it might only heighten it, make it worse. As hatred fosters hatred, sending a message of exclusion to the Middle East, North Africa or other Muslim communities will only strengthen the likes of Islamic State. It should be the duty of the European community to improve the integration of the migrants that we do take, with education as a key factor to stress our common values and not on what sets us apart.

## Europe of Christian Values - Not Christendom

Our first argument is that Europe is no longer the Europe of Christendom as it has otherwise previously been defined by history. Europe today is built on Christian values, although these same values do not exclude the values of Islam.

Europe is a relatively modern idea which gradually replaced the earlier community concept of Christendom in a complex intellectual process. After generations of violent religious conflict, the idea of Europe as separate from the idea of Christendom began to emerge in the late 1600s to early 1700s. Europe, as a concept, filled the need for a designation with more neutral and, at the same time, universal connotations during the early stages of the Enlightenment. Denys Hay states:

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver Smith *Mapped: Where in the world is safe from terror?* (2016)  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/Mapped-Terror-threat-around-the-world/>>  
[Accessed April 10 2017]

‘In the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Christendom slowly entered the limbo of archaic words and Europe emerged from its peoples as the unchallenged symbol of the largest human loyalty’.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Norman Davies notes that in the early phase of the Enlightenment, ‘it became an embarrassment for the divided community of nations to be reminded of their common Christian identity; and “Europe”, filled the need for a designation with more neutral connotations’.<sup>9</sup> By 1751, Voltaire described Europe as: ‘[...] a kind of great republic divided into several states, some monarchical, the others mixed [...] but all corresponding with one another. They all have the same religious foundation, even if divided into several confessions. They have the same principle in law and politics, unknown in other parts of the world’.<sup>10</sup>

The tradition of relying on Christianity for a foundation of values is still prevalent today, but as the Enlightenment has highly influenced today’s European society, we believe that it is clear that Christendom is not Europe’s main common denominator today, it is more so the values that have stemmed from Christianity, such as not stealing, killing, committing adultery, striving to do good, and letting all men be equal, which is why we do not believe that the Christian foundation that Europe is build on excludes other religions existence in Europe - in this case: the presence of Islam.

Therefore our second argument is that Europe does not exclude Islam. Historically speaking, it was not Europe that the Ottoman Turks threatened for instance, but Christendom since one was not distinct from the other. Again, Denys Hays writes that for diplomats ‘the intrusion of the Turk was a fact which could not be ignored and the practical acceptance of a Moslem state into the field of diplomacy might well have produced an early rejection of Christendom in the field of international relations....The language of diplomacy maintained the established terminology: “the common enemy, the Christian republic, the Christian world, the provinces of Christendom” are found in the phraseology of a large number of sixteenth and seventeenth-century treaties. A similar attitude is to be found in the treatises of the international lawyers down to, and even beyond Grotius. If the Turk was not different under natural law, he was certainly different under divine law: the Turk was not far short of a “natural enemy” of Christians’.<sup>11</sup> However, within the secularised ideas of the Enlightenment,

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<sup>8</sup> Denys Hay, *Europe: the Emergence of an Idea*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), p. 116

<sup>9</sup> Norman Davies, *Europe – A History*, (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 7

<sup>10</sup> Voltaire [1752], cited by Denys Hay, p. 123

<sup>11</sup> Denys Hay, pp. 113-114

as we have outlined, the Turk - or maybe rather the Muslim - should not be the natural enemy today as Europe does not predominantly define itself only by being a Christian anymore; it cannot define itself as being a purely Christian region anymore, today Europe is far too diverse.

Our last argument is that Europe's historical diversity should leave it further susceptible to outside influences. Historically, the key influences in European experience are the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Enlightenment and Industrialisation. It can be said that it is because these historical moments have not influenced Muslim immigrants' experience that they are not those whose home is Europe – moments others have designated “European civilisation”.<sup>12</sup> To make such an assumption, however, would be to solely acknowledge Western Europe. European civilisation has a long history of being influenced by especially its East, and Europe can be said to always have been quite diverse. To define European civilisation, we must first define the word “civilisation”; it is usually used today in terms of a single universal development (as in “human civilisation”); and the collective character of a people of a period that is different and incommensurable with others (as in “the civilizational of the renaissance in Italy”).<sup>13</sup> Wintle objects to equating civilisation to Europe because that will lead ‘quickly to unsustainable generalisation’. ‘There is a long history of shared influences and experiences, a heritage, which has not touched all parts of Europe or all Europeans equally’ and he claims further that it would be ‘hard and perhaps dangerous to define in single sentences [...] whose home is in Europe and which is recognised – whether approvingly or disapprovingly – by many from the outside’.<sup>14</sup> It is in its differences that Europe and European civilisation has come to be, and its identity in which there is an Islamic component, cannot and should not be disregarded.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as we see it Europe has always been a place of diversity. While it is still based on Christian values, these values are not exclusively Christian any longer, this has opened Europe up for Islamic influences, which we do not see as negative. We acknowledge that there are certain difficulties with the integration of Islam in Europe, these must be

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Wintle, “Cultural Identity in Europe: Shared Experience,” *Culture and Identity in Europe*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), p. 13

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, *Key Words* (London: Fontana [Collins], 1983)

<sup>14</sup> Michael Wintle, p. 13

addressed. But we also acknowledge that Islam is now and has for a long time been integrated in certain European spaces. However, the coexistence of Islam and Europe can be improved with a heightened focus on shared values and an understanding of our common influences, because despite our differences, our moral values do not exclude each other, this is proved by the Muslim communities all over Europe. It is our opinion that in order for a better integration to succeed, education is key.