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Islam, Europe and Democracy.
Seeking answers in an ongoing discussion.

When approaching the discourse on *Islam, Europe and Democracy*, and laying aside apparent understandings and admissions, we are faced with certain observations and questions. This brief contribution aims at setting them.

A first approach of "Islam, Europe, and Democracy" bears with it a certain consensus. That is, that Islam, as a religious system, with more or less apparent theocratic elements – depending on the countries it dominates and where it is applied, as well as due to its "essentialist" religious and political trajectory in time and sociopolitical process – does not carry with it European values and the imperatives of the West, such as Democracy and, consequently, the spirit of Enlightenment. Such values are considered shaped by the European spirit – due to both Christianity and secularism – and produced by the struggles of the French Revolution against religious authority and the tyranny of monarchy[1]. A variety of historical, spiritual, philosophical and political journeys have yielded a unique heritage for the individual, society and humanity as well, thereby safeguarding human rights and protecting the individual from the terms and imperatives of a religiously and politically pre-modern communal

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[1] The Enlightened movement contributed to the significant scientific progress in terms of rationality and objectivity. That era launched a more introvert approach to perceiving "others", orientalist at first, but greatly influential until the present day. According to Berger "Enlightenment demanded rationality and impartiality, and European explorers took to feverishly collecting all sorts of information and material from the new and exotic worlds in a manner that was to be objective and factual. The example was set by the 'army' of scholars that Napoleon had taken with him to Egypt in 1796 CE: they took measurements of pharaonic temples and Islamic mosques, made detailed drawings of the dress people wore as well as flora and fauna, and studied the wildlife and the customs of the people. The results were published in the voluminous *Description de l'Égypte*, a collection of exceptionally thorough and accurate studies published during the years 1809 to 1822. The study is still a delight to peruse, and is astonishingly relevant to the modern reader": M. Berger, *A Brief History of Islam in Europe*, Leiden University Press, Leiden 2014, p. 182.

life. Democracy guarantees that a state functions with elected representatives and that all citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of their sex, color, religious beliefs and political opinions. Different languages, religions, and cultures are equal, therefore to be respected within the framework of a statutory secular law. Indeed, the European Parliament purportedly supports democratic values and human rights even beyond its geographical boundaries; however, without effectively preventing either violence or profitable firearms trafficking[2].

This point gives birth to a multiplicity of questions. Such questions concern not only the national and religious histories of the European states and their different financial status, but also their political past or present, both in respect to former juntas, for instance in Greece, Spain and Portugal[3], and the existence of imperial, colonial and post-colonial policies[4], the birth and violence of Nazism, the modern revival of fascism, and the existence of post-communist state entities, as is the case of the deeply divided Balkans or, newly renamed, South-East Europe. All these are but a mere enumeration of the multiplicity but also of the differences inherent to Europe and the various implementations of democracy.

On the contrary, if one browses the contemporary predominantly-Muslim states, he/she will observe oligarchic regimes, censorship and rigid religious structures even regarding the implementation of law –the Islamic law, along with financial inequality and racial difference, uneven capitalist penetration, as well as a wide diversity in the Middle and Near East countries. Furthermore, one will notice the divergences and differences between the large Muslim populations of Asia and those of Islam's original birthplace in Arabia, as well as the Muslim communities in our neighboring Balkans. Scratching off the label of a "single" Islam or the Sunni and Shi'ite polarity, will allow many particular, religious, historical, national, racial, cultural, financial, lingual, and narrative realities to emerge.

The same is true of the Muslims of Europe, who, irrespective of their various origins and historical presence in several European countries,

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[2] "In December 2020, the Council adopted a decision and a regulation establishing a global human rights sanctions regime. For the first time, the EU will be able to target individuals, entities and bodies responsible for, involved in or associated with serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide, no matter where they occurred. The framework for targeted restrictive measures applies to acts such as genocide, crimes against humanity and other serious human rights violations or abuses": retrieved from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/human-rights/ (access February 5, 2021).

[3] For a more thorough analysis of Juntas in Europe, see N. Rodríguez-Salcedo, T. Watson, *The development of public relations in dictatorships – Southern and Eastern European perspectives from 1945 to 1990*, in "Public Relations Review", XLIII, n. 2, 2017, pp. 375-381.

[4] G. Joffé, *Boundary delimitation. The role of history*, in G. Joffé, R. Schofield (eds.), *Geographic Realities in the Middle East and North Africa: State, Oil and Agriculture*, Routledge, Surrey 2020, pp. 81-100.

have, in their own way, also contributed to shaping the European cultural heritage, as early as during Averroes'[5] era and the appearance of Muslims in medieval Sicily[6], but also through colonialism, when for centuries, in a paradoxical as well as dominant way, the peoples of Arabia, Africa, the lands of India and other areas of the world, involuntarily partook in the European culture alongside the varied presence of Europeans on their lands, and became mediators, yet were also subjected to various networks and exchanges, slave trade included[7].

This is a second key point to consider. It concerns the question of whether Europe is to be viewed through – a strictly or not – religious lens, that is as exclusively Christian and/or secular, and, respectively, Muslim states as being purely Islamic and, what's more, as bearers of an "authentic" and "universal" Islam. A brisk trot through the Hellenistic "universe", the Roman Empire, but also through medieval Western Europe and the Byzantine East, reveals the existence of a multiplicity of religions and syncretisms, in addition to Jewish, later Christian, as well as Muslim populations in Europe. Similarly, the Balkans – under Ottoman dominance for many centuries – are inhabited by Muslim populations with diverse ori-

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[5] "Arab Muslim philosophers like Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina have become part of the European canon of philosophy, known under their Latinized names of, respectively, Averroes and Avicenna. Averroes, who applied the philosophical thinking of Aristotle to theological questions, was a major source of inspiration to Thomas Aquinas who referred to him merely as 'the Philosopher'. Being an admirer of Averroes was also the reason for being expelled from more religiously orthodox European universities – not because Averroes was a Muslim, which was not generally known, but because his Aristotelian ideas were considered too radical at the time": M. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[6] Early medieval Sicily was a site of interaction between Latin and Greek Christians, Muslims, and Jews. From the middle of the 9th to the 11th century, Sicily became connected with the Muslim world, mainly that of North Africa, and began an enduring relation with *Dār al-Islām* (The Abode of Islam). Important political but also intercultural, commercial, and scholarly exchanges have been produced, with latter documentation provided mostly through North African sources. Concerning these exchanges, networks and documentation, it is crucial to highlight the role of Jewish merchants "living and working in the Muslim world and using Arabic as their daily spoken language, played vital roles in connecting Sicily with both Ifrīquiya and Egypt due in large part to the fact that these communities lived and did the majority of their business in Fusṭāṭ, Egypt, where the Cairo Geniza documents were preserved": S. Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Meet: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2017, pp. 114-115. On the interaction between Normans on the one hand and Byzantines and Muslims on the other, based on Latin resources and founded on their common treatment as 'alien' to the Western Christian Culture, see E. Tounta, *The Norman Conquerors between Epos and Chanson de Geste: The Perception of Identities in Cultural Flows,* in S. Burkhardt, T. Foerster (eds), *Norman Tradition and Transcultural Heritage: Exchange of Cultures in the 'Norman' Peripheries of Medieval Europe*, Routledge, Surrey 2013, pp. 125-148.

[7] B. K. Freamon, *Slavery and Society in East Africa, Oman, and the Persian Gulf*, in N. Lenski, C. Cameron. (eds.), *What Is a Slave Society? The Practice of Slavery in Global Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 337-359.

gins and practices that interlard Islamic "orthodoxy" with particular, local characteristics[8]. In addition, the Middle East was and still is, albeit less so, inhabited by a variety of Christian, and only few Jewish populations, since most Jews from Arabia and Iran have moved to the contemporary state of Israel[9]. What's more, many mainly Hindu, but also Buddhist immigrant populations reside in the Gulf countries nowadays, and live alongside the natives, establishing their own businesses, schools and houses of worship, thereby creating an emerging, new social reality[10]. Thus, a second reading of history allows us to peel off both the European and Islamic world's uniformity, and observe that the Old Continent is interrelated with the Middle and Near East as well as North Africa in various ways; and vice versa[11].

We have come to realize that the Unified Europe project, albeit partly successful, has not abolished the financial and social inequalities between its member states. Citizens are left without social security while the welfare state's achievements are gradually being sacrificed for neoliberalism's sake; at the same time, many, mainly South and East European countries, Greece included, experience a constant tension between particular sets of positions and their contradictions. Likewise, there is no one single, generally accepted historical and political narrative for Europe. At any rate there could not, since that would mean abolishing the local national and religious histories and particularities. Europe has not managed to ward off post-colonial policies, violence and wars, both in its southeast underbelly, but also beyond its geographical boundaries, mainly in the Middle East and North Africa[12]. However, it has been able to streamline its citizens' movement, as well as create an open work market and al-

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[8] A. Elbasani, J. Tošić, *Localized Islam(s): interpreting agents, competing narratives, and experiences of faith*, in "Nationalities Papers", XLV, 4, 2017, pp. 499-510; S. Evstatiev, *Milletic Secularism in the Balkans: Christianity, Islam, and Identity in Bulgaria*, in "Nationalities Papers", XLVII, 1, 2019, pp. 87-103; K. Ghodsee, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010; K. Tsitselikis, *Old and New Islam in Greece. From Historical Minorities to Immigrant Newcomers*, V, Brill, Leiden 2012, pp. 535-543; A. Ziaka, *Greece. Debate and Challenges*, in M. S. Berger (ed.) *Applying Shari'a in the West. Facts, Fears and the Future of Islamic Rules on Family Relations in the West,* Leiden University Press, Leiden 2013, pp. 125-139.

[9] M. Kamrava, *Leading the Faithful: Religious Authority in the Contemporary Middle East*, in "Sociology of Islam", VI, 2, 2018, pp. 97-115.

[10] J. Calabrese, *India-Gulf Migration: A testing time,* in Middle East Institute website (April 14, 2020). Retrieved from https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-gulf-migration-testing-time (accessed February 5, 2021).

[11] J. Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam: Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014 [2012].

[12] A contemporary discussion on the complexity of the European Union and the globalized world in relation to the basic concepts of democracy can be found in D. Innerarity, *Democracy in Europe. A Political Philosophy of the EU,* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2018.

low unhampered mobility through open borders; such facilitations are currently challenged by financial austerity measures, security imperatives and an ever-growing bureaucracy. Nowadays, such benefits are further challenged due to the phenomenon of terrorism, especially Islamist terrorism, recruiting young European Muslim fighters – born and raised in European states – into its networks[13].

In many respects, Europe's Islam reflects its states' different colonial histories, but also Europe's contemporary, post-colonial accountability for the destruction of many cradles of civilization, such as in Mesopotamia, Iraq, Syria and others. Europe's Muslims, completely different from each other but for their religious origin and its particular connotations, are kept on the margins of European history and are either to conform and get acculturated or become excluded. However, despite such a disproportionate critical approach they are faced with, Europe's Muslims enjoy many liberties, mainly freedom of religion and expression, in a way still unfathomable in many predominantly-Muslim countries. We also notice that, while seeking both an identity as well as economic security, many of Europe's Muslims develop new kinds of relations with powerful Muslim states and networks, and express personal perceptions of religiousness, open or closed ones, which are neither surveilled nor patronized by a "state-led religiousness". At the same time, however, they are expected – as are all other European citizens – to respect criticism towards religion[14]. European policies, partly incomplete, have not managed to come up with effective ways of equal social and economic integration for Europe's Muslims. Most European states are puzzled by the issues of religion and education, which have often been left at the mercy of religious communities; likewise, identity issues have only been approached theoretically.

In Europe there is a significant and ongoing discussion on the issue of teaching religion in public schools. Satisfactory answers, helping students gain broader knowledge of religious matters and respect religious otherness irrespective of their own religious identity, are probably yet to be found. Such an education should be flexible both concerning the students' personal religious identity as well as the European ideals of freedom of expression and respect towards religious, cultural and ethnic otherness. Recently, significant steps have been taken to upgrade Islamic education in the public schools of the European Union member states. Such a development, however positive, remains inscribed within a "safe" bipolar

[13] S. Brzuszkiewicz, *Radicalisation in Europe after the Fall of Islamic State: Trends and Risks*, in "European View", XVII, 2, 2018, pp. 145-154; G. Joffé (ed.), *Islamist Radicalization in Europe and the Middle East,* I.B. Tauris, London and New York 2012.
[14] M. Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-238.

division of students[15], on the one hand due to respect towards different religious communities, on the other due to a lack of shared approaches and instruction regarding religious matters in public schools, but also in public space in general. I believe that nowadays it is crucial for European states to offer a dynamic religious education within the framework of democracy and respect towards each student's identity. Such an education means that the instructors are continuously retrained, and consists of courses that are non-static, but get constantly retooled, enhanced and readjusted according to the various, and rapidly changing needs of the society and the individuals as well. The material used for those courses will not be a "closed" book, but "open" files, in the hands of every educator to use "properly" according to the class' and students' educational needs. That is, a course and not a doctrine that runs counter to both the principles of education and children's rights, but instead fosters respect towards every student's personality. Such an education would appreciate each religious tradition's wealth, it would promote the longstanding presence of religions both in the world and in each state separately, it would limit itself neither to narrow interpretations of the past nor to one-dimensional religious particularities of the present, but would use them as a starting point for a dialogue with the rest of the world, history, culture and the society. That kind of education would further encourage contemporary student-teacher interaction and would cultivate a spirit of kindness, love and critical curiosity about humanity and its values[16]. Although in recent years there have been some changes in Islamic religious education textbooks, these issues are still the desideratum par excellence, even in predominantly-Muslim states[17]. The issue of religious otherness "situates tolerance within an Islamic worldview as encompassing the qualities of generosity, softheartedness, and compassion"[18].

Ever since the events of September 11th 2001, the issue of Islamist terrorism has been besieging not only American politics, but European too, which has also witnessed criminal attacks on its ground. It was then that, alongside the surveillance measures, a rigorous political and journalistic

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[15] F. Panjwani, *No Muslim is just a Muslim: implications for education*, in "Oxford Review of Education", XLIII, 5, 2017, pp. 596-611.

[16] On these issues see A. Ziaka (ed.), *Intercultural Religious Education and Islamic Studies. Challenges and Perspectives in Greece, Europe, USA*, (Bilingual edition Greek/English) Maistros, Athens 2016; L. Franken, B. Gent (eds.), *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study*, Routledge, Surrey (Forthcoming) 2021; M. Koukounaras Liagkis, A. Ziaka, *Religious Education in Greece – Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Secularism*, in "European Journal of Social Science", V, 1, 2015, pp. 44-53.

[17] S. F. Krishna-Hensel (ed.), *Religion, Education and Governance in the Middle East: Between Tradition and Modernity*, Routledge, Surrey 2012.

[18] M. Alhashmi, N. Bakali, R. Baroud, *Tolerance in UAE Islamic Education Textbooks*, in "Religions", XI, 8, 2020, pp. 377-390, p. 377.

preoccupation with Islam and Islamic studies started to grow in several centers and university foundations[19]. Criticism of Islamic studies fluctuates between two extreme and conterminous perceptions; the first one, emanating from a human rights position as it claims, supports that preoccupation with Islam is a domain belonging exclusively to its subjects, that is Muslims, and is therefore resistant to scientific examination and analysis conducted by non-Muslim scholars. The second type of criticism assumes that it can serve well both science and security by showcasing the "authentic" Islam, the true religion beyond polemics and debates[20]. Both positions presuppose that religions are "essentialist" and "authentic" regarding their teachings, but also static in relation to time and society. Of course there is an alternative way to go about this issue, and its many paths and tracks involve becoming reacquainted with the longstanding relations between Europe and its agents, and the Eastern world, as well as with their bilateral critical – political and religious – opposition. Perhaps it is only then, when Europe rises to the height of its values and Muslim citizens start participating in shaping their countries' history as well as taking responsibility for their societies' trajectories – as is already the case in many European countries, albeit not commonly but rather exceptionally – that new kinds of answers might emerge, beyond divisions, monolithic understandings and competitions, and beyond the fear of otherness. To be sure, this remains a desideratum par excellence for predominantly Muslim states as well.

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[19] S. Schwartz, *The Terrorist War against Islam: Clarifying Academic Confusions,* in "Academic Questions", XXIV, 2011, pp. 59-73.

[20] For an intriguing discussion of the topic, see A. W. Hughes, *The Study of Islam Before and After September 11: A Provocation*, in "Method & Theory in the Study of Religion", XXIV, 4/5, 2012, pp. 314-336; Id., *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity. An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self -Deception,* Bristol, Sheffield 2015, pp. 1-4.

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