Imams in Western Europe

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Satellites or a Different Universe?

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Abstract
This chapter examines the process of adapting organized Islam to the institutional needs of the modern state. The adaptation processes that Islam is currently undergoing in Europe are compared to similar developments in the history of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: Islam in diaspora, Seminaries, church-state relationship, Catholic Church, United States

1 Introduction

The process of adapting organized Islam to the institutional needs of the modern state in Europe is happening less than a century after the agreements between the Catholic Church and the European states, and two centuries after that of Judaism. However, Islam cannot really be considered late if we take into account the great number of Muslim-majority countries that endured colonial continuity after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire, with the arrival of the French, British, and Italian Empires. Only through national independence has Islam begun to find a role in state institutions, a process that has become clearer through the pressure for democratization. This chapter compares the adaptation processes that organized Islam is currently undergoing in Europe with similar developments in the Catholic Church in the nineteenth-century United States.
The Muslim diaspora

The democratization of Islamic nation-states is happening at the same time as the migration that has given birth to an overseas diaspora. We are thus witnessing the natural reaction of the older centres of Islamic religious authority to the appearance of new demographic groups. For example, there is growing investment by the capital cities of origin countries in the construction of monumental mosques in Europe for the use of their diaspora (Fuess, 2007). There is a range of training programmes for imams that are adapted to the language and culture of the European destination countries. And we can see the beginnings of hierarchical structures of ulama that are adapted to everyday life in Europe, of which the European Council of Moroccan Ulema is a prime example. In the past, these efforts were mostly uncoordinated and eclectic – and they still do not always manage to meet the actual demand for infrastructure and religious authority to respond to daily life. As of yet, none play the role of the ministry of waqf or traditional habous (‘religious endowments’) in Muslim-majority countries. From a historical point of view, it is natural for such an institutional gap to close slowly. Islamic schools are still rare on the European continent: the Netherlands counts a small number, while Great Britain has significantly more. Mosques built for the purpose of training make up only a small proportion of the Muslim places of worship in Europe.

One may wonder why the representative bodies of Islam such as the CFCM (Conseil français du culte musulman; French Council of the Muslim Faith) or the Deutsche Islam Konferenz (German Islam Conference) have not succeeded in managing everything after ten years of work (Kortmann and Rosenow-Williams, 2013). This delay is quite normal, considering the transformation of Islam into a minority religion on Western soil. It is unrealistic to imagine that such a transition could happen over a short period of time. This situation is stimulating an institutional response from the ‘religious’ capitals of various countries of Sunni Muslim origin, particularly those in the Maghreb (North Africa) and Turkey. Ultimately, the persistence of imported imams has had the greatest impact. The vast majority of imams in Germany were trained in Ankara, while most formally educated prayer leaders in France, Italy, and Spain have attended religious schools in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, or the Gulf. This is the case for the imams who arrive in Europe with visas for four or five years, as well as the hundreds of prayer leaders and reciters of the Quran who are sent to Europe to preach during the month of Ramadan. However, the home states have failed to provide sufficient religious personnel to cover all of the places of
worship, hospitals, and prisons that serve the diaspora in Europe. How are we to consider this state of affairs? Is the pursuit of ‘externalization’ and the use of national Islamic bureaucracies in foreign countries just a quick fix? Are European societies missing the opportunity to take up the task of acclimatization?

There are ample tangible signs that more durable institutional solutions have begun to take shape among the Islamic diasporas in Europe. Despite the appearance of disarray, there are several institutional developments that mark the permanence and true beginning of various European national Islams. I hypothesize that this represents the passage ‘towards European Islams’ – a French Islam, a German Islam, a British Islam, etc. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the idea of creating a ‘European’ Islam cut off from its origins in Muslim countries does not make sense; it would be rather like insisting on dropping the reference to Rome in ‘Roman Catholicism’.

I would like to examine the logic governing the recent developments in this area to determine where these efforts place the institutional history of Sunni Islam since the end of the Ottoman Empire. We are witnessing a phase of ‘professionalization’ in Islamic religious training that is part of a broader institutional response to both the ‘exogenous shocks’ experienced by ‘religious centres’, including, for example, Algiers, Ankara, Rabat, Tunis, and, more recently, the challenge of a diaspora that is beyond the reach of the law and administration of the host countries (Bauböck and Faist, 2010).

What we see is the attempt to maintain religious influence over a group that has grown dramatically during a very short period of time. Unlike the countries of origin, where there is one imam for every one or two mosques, until now it has not been possible to meet the demand for imams in Western European societies (Qattab, 2009). While what is happening in the diaspora represents only a small portion of the tip of the iceberg of changes in Islamic religious authority, mass immigration – sometimes equalling as much as 10 per cent of the country of origin’s population – is the same fundamental challenge that led another world religion (Roman Catholicism) to take religious training more seriously in the nineteenth century.

3 The example of the Catholic Church

The analogy that can and must be made between the institutional development of Islam and that of other religions that have recently experienced a diaspora – such as Catholicism in the nineteenth century – lies in what is
now being set up to organize religious affairs relating to the Muslim faith. Indeed, it was the unplanned and involuntary establishment of Catholics as a religious minority outside of their religious metropoles that eventually allowed local Catholic bureaucracies to thrive (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992). We are witnessing the same process today in the development of Islamic religious governance in European host countries. The religious institutions of both Catholics and Sunni Muslims have reacted to this ‘accident’ of history – that is, the diasporas – that developed in the Americas in the nineteenth century for Catholics and in Europe in the twentieth century for Muslims. The comparison of these two religions requires a change in perspective and a revision of the common description of Islamic religious governance as ‘non-hierarchical’ or ‘non-clerical’. The main institutional stakeholders here are precisely the hierarchical ministries of Islamic affairs in the countries of origin and the formal councils (ulama) that oversee the large and growing demand for guidance in prayer and religious education. At every major turning point of modern European history, religions have been the first to struggle to maintain their influence and their centralized control over diasporas. Religious capitals – the Vatican for Catholicism and Rabat, Alger, and Ankara for Islam – have never been passive actors in this process.

The migrations of Roman Catholics to North America resulted in the formation of an unexpected minority that created what could be called an ‘Emigrant Empire’. The residence of Catholics in non-Catholic majority countries provoked an adaptive institutional response from the Catholic Church (Bauböck and Faist, 2010). Even when the legal authority of a religious capital becomes null and void, its spiritual influence can still cross national borders in the form of theological power. Two main tasks were and are imposed on the Catholic Church: awareness of its new role to support the religious practice of its minorities abroad; and, as a consequence, the right to defend the same people against proselytism. At first, most American Catholics led their lives outside of the reach of a consecrated chapel – infrastructural density was thin: there were 1500 Catholics per church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992). This number is just below the average of 1700 Muslims per mosque in twenty-first century Europe (Cameron, 2015).

While hardly an exact equivalent, the experiences of Catholicism in the United States and Islam in Europe are similar in order and nature. Because of inadequate infrastructure, diasporas are exposed to certain risks; from the perspective of the ‘religious capital’ they are extremely susceptible to external influences, for example. There was also the risk that as successive
generations of Catholics attended public schools, they might fall under the spell of Protestant missionaries from hundreds of sects – proselytizing Methodists or Mormons, or even secularist Republicans. There were tensions within the diaspora because of the variety of customs, languages, and traditions practiced by groups from different origin countries, as well as the varying prejudices each part of the community was exposed to. Since the nineteenth century, reports issued by envoys of the Pope were quick to arrive in Rome stating that many Catholic immigrants in the United States were losing their faith, and that Rome would need to intervene to counteract the problem. This challenging scene is not entirely different from that of the contemporary Muslim diaspora in Europe.

This great and unexpected ‘Emigrant Empire’ was first ignored, and then shortly thereafter considered a risk. The national Catholic Churches competed with each other, and priests had to be imported from the countries of origin. The New World became a site of imperial rivalry for the souls of both the indigenous peoples and the settlers. The British and Dutch competed with each other for colonial dominance, overshadowing the Spanish, French, and Portuguese. The United States was effectively written off by the Roman Catholic Church after the Seven Years’ War, which ended in 1761 with France’s surrender of most of North America to England.

However, the new Catholic population that arrived in the mostly Protestant United States through labour immigration a century later again attracted the eyes of Rome. This was the beginning of the internationalization of ecclesiastical authorities outside of Europe, with the spread of dioceses, training seminars, theological faculties at universities, and the sending of bishops and cardinals all over the world to serve the Catholic minorities (in addition to services intended for overseas colonies). In just 30 years, between 1820 and 1850, the number of Catholic churches in the United States increased from 124 to 1124, and from 1850 to 1860 it again doubled to 2550 (Cassidy, 1924). The construction of churches and the arrival of a sufficient number of priests happened fast enough, but the foundation of schools and on-site seminars took time. In 1821 an isolated, solitary seminar in Baltimore started to train priests, but this one programme was not enough for the onslaught of millions of Catholic immigrants who arrived at the continental territory of the United States throughout the nineteenth century (Goebel, 1937). The same delay occurred for secondary education. To address the shortage of clergy, there had been proposals to train priests in Leuven, Belgium, as a short-term solution; an American college was opened there in 1859. However, the number of churches evidently increased faster than priests could arrive or be trained. The linguistic plurality of immigrant communities (German,
Irish, Italian, and Polish) complicated the situation further. A generation after the massive influx of Catholics, there were still only a handful of formal seminars to train the priests meant to serve a Catholic population of close to six million. As a result, many priests were not ‘professionals’, and were often uneducated in the rites.

This situation provoked a centralized response from Rome. In 1853, the Church sent a nuncio to visit the major cities in the United States with a Catholic minority and undertake a first inspection of the locally created organizational culture. This is comparable to the visits of the President of the Turkish Diyanet, the Moroccan Minister of Habous, or the Secretary General of the Muslim World League to their allied organizations in Europe. The nuncio discovered that ‘Many immigrants had lost faith [...] more than those who had joined other churches.’ Following this report, in 1854 the Pope proposed the creation of an ‘American College’ in Rome. He also established French, Irish, Polish, and Latin American colleges. The original Collegio Romano and Collegio Germanico date from the sixteenth century (Cassidy, 1924); the idea was to invite American students to Rome to learn how to become ‘proper’ Catholic priests – a form of signalling that they needed to follow institutional standards if they really wanted to regulate the religious life of the immigrant populations. As a response to the new ‘emigrant’ Church, the Pope personally supervised the creation of a record number of dioceses and archdioceses to cater to Catholics overseas: 130, or 15 per cent of the existing dioceses in the world at the time.

4 The Muslim diaspora in Western Europe

For the Sunni Islam diaspora a century later, it is obviously Western Europe that plays the role of the United States in comparison to the various Islamic ‘religious capitals’. When the religious capitals’ political power was taken away by the fact that they are foreign citizens, spiritual leadership became their only transnational currency. Once there is a sufficient mass of believers residing in a foreign jurisdiction, there are few options other than resorting to ‘soft power’ (Ozdora-Aksak, 2014). The creation of a foreign diaspora raises some difficulties (quantity and quality of services), challenges (defending against rivals and extremists), and opportunities (power struggles or evangelization). How can we understand the efforts implemented by states of origin to fill the void of religious services for their citizens and their citizens’ descendants abroad?
The first and most urgent question always concerns the quantity and quality of the religious infrastructure, i.e., the places of worship and the clergy. With the passing of time, however, the missionary goal turns into one of socialization: continuing religious traditions through subsequent generations. This socialization is happening in the twenty-first century; for example, the number of Islamic educational establishments in France increased from 9 in 2010 to 34 in 2014 (Barou, 2014). The number of prayer spaces also increased from 1300 in 2001 to 2500 today. There is still a real shortage of imams. There are two kinds of educational institutions needed: one for the clergy and teachers, and one for the children and students of the community.

The countries of origin have sometimes sought to literally appropriate the existing prayer spaces and mosques of their diasporas. From the early 1980s to the 2000s there have been supporting operations from Turkey through the CCMTF (Comité de coordination des musulmans turcs de France; the Coordinating Committee of Turkish Muslims in France) and the FNMF (Fédération nationale des musulmans de France; National Federation of Muslims in France), as well as through related associations from Morocco (Senay, 2013). These same networks have made the construction of new mosque-cathedrals (i.e., big mosques, rather than small prayer-rooms) possible: there is now one in Cologne and one in Strasbourg, both symbols of the new, lasting presence of Islam in the institutional and architectural landscape of these European cities (Allievi, 2009).

Finally, it is vital to draw the reader’s attention to institutional developments that parallel the development of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. We see the same pattern of institutionalization through both the ‘collegio’ model – training targeted at the diaspora, but taking place in the country of origin – and the diocesan seminary model, which is located in the host country (Catholic Church, 1958). With relocation, the trusteeship of the Congregation Propaganda Fide was lifted, which brought the Catholics in the United States under the centralized Church hierarchy and Canon Law – both in the early twentieth century. For Islam, the equivalent of the ‘collegio’ was opened in the early twenty-first century; for example, since 2006 more than 350 foreign students, almost all Europeans, have been registered at a religious training course in Istanbul. Similarly, in Rabat the King Mohammed VI International Imam Training Centre opened its doors to the first class of 50 students from France in 2015 (Brown, 2015; see also Hashas, Part I). In terms of religious ‘hierarchy’, the anchoring of the European Council of Moroccan Ulema in Brussels is a key sign of institutional adaptation to the permanence and specificity of the European diaspora as a
religious minority and the recognition of new religious realities for believers, without creating a new jurisprudential section. In the end, 'the territory' of the modern Muslim state also incorporates the diaspora of millions of European Union citizens with origins in that country.

This is, of course, far from the level of institutional internationalization demonstrated by the cardinals who serve in the various governmental bodies of the Vatican. For the moment, European Islam only has what could be considered the equivalent of apostolic delegates – for example, the ambassadors of countries representing official Islams. However, Mohamed Moussaoui and Dalil Boubakeur are among the first 'bishops' of Moroccan and Algerian Islam, respectively, in France today. The religious centres of authority need to nurture, manage, and then maintain their relationships with the faithful after a temporary loss of power. In short, this is the story of transnational religion: the religious capital must recognize political 'defeat' and accept the transfer of administrative and legal control over the faithful who become citizens of a third country. While doing so, the religious capital seeks to preserve its natural role in the spiritual supervision of its diaspora believer-citizens. In the end, the religious centre accepts the weakening of its temporary political relationships in exchange for spiritual fatherhood.

In the history of Catholicism, the Vatican has accepted this exchange after 60 years of crossing the desert, during which the 'Roman Question' remained an open wound. Before that happened, however, the new European national authorities put the Catholic hierarchy under the yoke of national governments, insisting on the right to approve the appointment of priests and bishops sent by Rome. One can think of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in France, but also of the anti-clerical laws of the late nineteenth century, which saw the takeover of Catholic hierarchies by national governments in Germany, Spain, and Italy. It had not been long since the wars of the Investiture Controversy – and it is impossible to deny the similarities with current European Islam. Only with the Vatican’s establishment as a sovereign state in 1929 did Europe’s nation-states manage to close the Roman Question – more than a century after the concordats. Internal autonomy is restored to a religious community that can organize itself as it wishes under local legal frameworks. Can we assume that the relationship between the major Muslim capitals – such as Rabat, Algiers, or Ankara – and their diasporas will in the future look like the Rome of today, each with its own natural and organic sphere of influence?

It is important to realize that Catholic and Muslim diasporas were considered temporary. Rome has come to accept the permanence of its minority – and has therefore gotten down to sanctioning the spread of schools and
seminars. Similarly, Turkey, Algeria, and the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs did not consider their migrants in Western Europe a permanent minority until recently (Hosseini, 2013). This is a process that requires the operation of localization so that it absorbs the diversity of the periphery. In the United States, it took 50 years before the number of churches and schools met the demographic requirements (in the late nineteenth century). It took one hundred years before there were enough schools and Catholic teachers (between the two World Wars) (Cassidy, 1924). Decades passed before American Catholics got a cardinal. Even more patience was required for obtaining their fair share in the College of Cardinals – and it still took a few more decades, until the mid-twentieth century, for the majority of Catholic priests in the United States to be US graduates.

Paradoxically, asking foreign religious capitals to ‘drop’ control in this context must take the form of the creation of bureaucracies designed to precisely fit the targeted diaspora, which can actually leave much room for localization. What we see now is the spiritualization of international religious networks that no longer have jurisdiction beyond their own borders, and whose new currency is therefore only spiritual. In a way, this is the resolution based on the ‘success’ of relations between the state and the church. The church-state relationship is loaded, and necessarily creates a tense atmosphere. To function, neither party should think of itself as completely victorious or ‘defeated’. Rather, it demands mutual tolerance, after the recognition of legal and political competence in a separate manner. This is what seems to be happening now with Islam in Europe, albeit slowly. Internationalization and negotiation as a minority can provide support for this historic change.

References


**About the author**

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