Muslim identity between the "religious pluralism" and "perception of absolute religion" in Europe

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Abstract

The "religious pluralism" constitutes one of the main parts of the sociology of the European continent. Today, different religions which practiced in Europe, makes the "religious pluralism" necessary for a harmonious social structure. Theoretically, we can assume that the Europe's secular democratic structure provides a suitable environment to religious pluralism. But when it comes to Muslim population, activity of this population as an effective subject, force us two-sided analysis including the Muslim population and Europe. We begin the analysis by asking the following question: Can Muslims living in Europe develop a discourse based on religious pluralism? In the light of recent researches- although has increased partly compared to the past- it is understood that the pluralistic religious discourse has not been developed yet. The idea of the absolute religion which carried out over times never loses its influence in the mindset of Europeans against the pluralist approach. Islamic discourse that has been covering a wide area of daily life presses the Muslims between the religious freedom and rules of the secular democratic structure often. Most of the European Muslims strictly believe that their freedom of religion is being restricted. Besides that, there's seems a serious softening among European Muslims about participate in rituals carried out by members of other religions. It could be said about Muslim identity in Europe: On the one hand, there continue the tenet of religious pluralism to remain under the strong influence of traditional Islamic discourse but on the other hand discourse based on religious tolerance is now developing rapidly.

Keywords: Europe, Islamic identity, religious pluralism, absolute religion discourse

1. Introduction

Europe's cosmopolitan structure based on multi ethnic society is expanding by including the religious diversity. Muslim immigrants are not temporary population in European societies anymore; they begin to be permanent and part of the main structure of European culture, instead of being stranger where they come before almost half century. In the main time, the issue of "Muslims integration" evolves to the stage of "how Islam is we want" in Europe. Being detached from their original culture more and more in every year, Muslim immigrants reconstruct their Islamic understanding which is based on local identity, by considering the principals of secular European culture, individual choice and freedom. Fragmented collective identities are being rebuilt as a secular and an individual-centred structure.

Depending on the situation the concepts of migration and labor which used to describe the presence of Islam in Europe, seem to have lost its validity in this modern period. And the concepts of Integration, assimilation and isolation are being used less. Rather, the usage of different concepts is now taking place such as "producing Islamic knowledge", "reconstruction of the Muslim identity" etc. In this case, questions of "What kind of identity and personality" gain a great significance. There again arises a new concept which is called "religious pluralism" as one of the subheadings of this re-reading process.

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Religious pluralism can be analysed at three consecutive social levels: at the macro-level, religious pluralism implies that the societal authorities recognize and accept a plurality within the religious field. At the meso-level, pluralism implies that the religious organizations which function as competitive units. And finally at the micro-level, pluralism implies an individual's freedom to choose and develop her or his own private beliefs. These modes of pluralism correspond with religious toleration, denominalization and religious freedom. However, these are not interrelated in a mechanical manner. İn principle, religious toleration could be organized within the framework of one latitudinarian church; denominalization could be organized by ascribing each individual to the religion of their parents; and religious freedom could imply an extreme individualization dissolving all denominations. (Riis, 2007:254) Also this concept shows the belief that all religions are equal and they are way of salvation (Çakmak, 2014:89).

In this study we are try to evaluate muslims living in Europe in terms of the concepts such as "Western Opposition", islamic identity, religious pluralism, religious perceptions, radicalism and European Islam… This text consists of the following titles:

- The Islamic Identity Against the Western Opposition
- Religious Perceptions of Muslims In Europe

2. The Islamic identity against the western opposition

Today, it is not the concern of Europeans "whether Islam would be regarded as an unacceptable religion or not". Rather, "which Islam is more suitable for Europe" is now at stake. There is a common agreement on this matter.

As it is mentioned above, Muslim migrants are not a provisional population in Europe any more. However, Muslims, who live in the Europe, are seen as a "problematic population". Because, the answer of "what kind of Islam do we want" question is not clear. The concrete responses of the "Which Islam is more suitable for Europe" have debatable suggestions and results in contradictory discussions between the "secular Europe discourse" and "original Islam discourse". The contrast between the East and West lays down the fundamental features of these discussions. (See. for the "roots of Muslim-Christian conflict", Ayoub, 1989: 25-45; and Aydın, 2011).

The most important part of the East and West is Islam-West opposition. This opposition continues at some extent today[1]. This section will involve this opposition.

In Western Europe, religion is generally viewed as the problem, not the solution, for immigrant minorities. (Foner & Alba, 2008:368) Especially Muslim minorities groups are the most problematic immigrant in Western Europe in terms of poverty, unemployment, and education (Foner & Alba, 2008:375). Even some authors argue that "green danger" took the place of the "red danger" after the cold war has just finished (Kalın, 2007:139). We could say that the statement of "green danger" is an exaggerated expression. But there are many examples show that Islam is generally viewed as the problem. We can read it firstly on the approaches of the authors:

The focus of scholarly commentaries on immigrant religion is almost exclusively on Islam. Far from being seen as integrating immigrants and facilitating successful adaptation

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[1] See. for the details about the creation of the image of Islam in the West, (Said, 2008). And for the creation of the image of West in the Islamic Thought, (Buruma & Margalit, 2004).

to European society, Islam is analyzed as a barrier or a challenge to integration and a source of conflict with mainstream institutions and practices (Foner & Alba, 2008:368).

And analyses of the Europeanization of Islam and of positive signs of Muslim integration and accommodation are often placed in the context of prevailing popular views that deny, ignore, or downplay these developments (Foner & Alba, 2008:368)

Muslims are often associated with premodern attitudes and practices and this has, to some extent, influenced the research agenda. (Foner & Alba, 2008:368-369)

And secondly on the Islamic practices in Europe. İn principle, European governments realize that they must find ways to fund and support the development of an independent Islam and offer some accommodations for Muslim religious practices. (Foner & Alba, 2008:385) But in practice there are significant deficiencies. For example, headscarf, islamophobia, discrimination, mosque building, education etc.

In some debates the headscarf is evaluated as an expression of fundamentalism, as an act of religious propaganda, and as a sign of unwillingness to integrate (Shadid & Van Koningsveld, 2005). As a general phenomenon: The headscarf is perceived as a religious obligation among the European Muslims. It cannot be generalized exactly but headscarf continues to be a legal problem in Europe.

The term Islamophobia is itself a signifier in that it flags religion as playing a central part in contemporary political debates (Taras, 2013:423). Scholars in Europe have written that "Muslimophobia is at the heart of contemporary (British and) European cultural racism" (Foner & Alba, 2008:370) And Islamophobia is spreading in Europe and the media intentionally plays a negative role on the matter.

When it comes to discrimination... Today, it is not illegal to discriminate against the Muslims for only being who they are (for example in U.K.). Because, the courts do not regard Muslims as an ethnic group. However, Jews and Sikh are considered as ethnic group (Modood, 2004:175).

In summary, many accounts discuss negative stereotypes of Islam, institutionalized discrimination, and the difficulties of practicing Islam in publicly visible ways. There are analyses of the bans on wearing the Islamic headscarf, for example, policies curtailing ritual slaughter, administrative barriers to building new mosques and enlarging old ones, and the reluctance of European governments to fund Islamic schools while, at the same time, supporting large numbers of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish schools (Foner & Alba, 2008:370).

Because of this reason, some European Muslims think that their freedom of belief is being restricted because of such practices. And almost all scholars in Turkey agree that present policies which produced for the sake of integrating Muslims to Europe, cannot offer any permanent solution.

3. Religious perceptions of Muslims in Europe

In general, European Muslims' self-confidence about their identity has been developed compared to the past. But they stil seem to have some problems concerning adaptation to Europe. For example, their approach to the human rights is not fully consistent with the modern European standards. And they have still some major problems considering Woman rights. There are some people among them, who believe that democratic values are not compatible exactly with Islam.

That is to say that some European Muslims may have been in trouble with some democratic values.

Muslims in Europe are still using a defensive language to express themselves. And Muslims are not sufficiently aware and active in civil society. Their activities are just limited to religious ones. Religious pluralism: According to European Muslims "true religion" is only the religion of Islam. Christianity has been historically distorted. And the Bible has been altered, the Quran is constant, unchanging. According to their majority the Quran is a book that answers all questions.

They use the concept of "ahl-al Kitap" to describe the Christian people in accordance to the Quran. Some of the Muslims use the concept of "kafir" {the terms kufr, kafir, as well as other forms of the root KFR, are at the center of the value system of the Qur'an. The meaning of the word is "unbeliever," it is in fact "unfaithful." (Waldman, 1968).} in addition to this concept: Ahl-al Kitap.

The most of them believe that Christians and Jews will go to the hell. A small part of Muslims believe that their good ones will go to the heaven and just bad ones will go to the hell. There are also a very small group believe that Allah knows it.

According to the European Muslims, going to the mosque is not compareted with going to the church. So, going to the mosque is beyond any comparison. But there seems some kind of softening among the Muslims (expecially young) about the participation of Christian rituals in church.

Origin ties of the Muslims in Europe and radicalism: Although the tendency to answering their own problems has been increasing the Muslims living in Europe expect the solutions of their religious problems from the Muslim countries. So, the solid ties of the Muslim with their culture of origin have been remained to some extent. These ties are sometimes used by some marginal groups as opportunity for the rise of radical Islamism and radical Islamist actions. The salafism is a once marginal group in Europe and Salafi approach is widely spreading in Europe.

Salafism is first and foremost a method for the search of the religious truth; a desire to practice Islam exactly as it was revealed by the Prophet. It is a religious method whose influence has spread throughout the Arab world and also in Europe, thanks to the support received from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which have helped expand this peculiar vision of Islam that is very close to Wahhabism (Stemmann, 2006).

Until the beginning of the 1990s, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Tabligh played a central role in re-islamisation, effectively enjoying a monopoly in the supply of Islam to Europe. Since then, we have witnessed the diversification of this supply with the arrival of new actors. Among them, salafism, a once marginal group in Europe, has become a pillar of re-islamisation at the beginning of the 21st century, competing with the more traditional structures. While both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Tabligh present a doctrinal and organisational homogeneity, Salafism appears to be a movement that is both pluralist and contradictory of which it is necessary to identify its multiple European components. The majority of Islamist and neo-fundamentalist movements claim a link with Salafism (Amghar, 2007:38-39, 40).

Bassam Tibi challenges Islamist and radical movements in Europe and says radicals do not contribute to the integration of the Muslims in Europe. To him, treating ethnical identities in Diaspora can pave the way for new absolutism and conflicts. Alternative of this is the civilian identities basing on the cultural pluralism, which encompasses all (Tibi, 2004:77, 78).

Muslims in Europe divide into two parts between the religious radicalism and religious tolerance: On one hand, the aggrieved sense of exclusion felt by many Muslims who have grown up in Europe has created a pool of potential recruits for fundamentalist doctrines and radical Islamist groups, a development that could reinforce and indeed increase tensions with long-established Europeans. On the other hand, some predict that as the second generation takes over in religious associations and institutions, they will generally strive for a more liberal version of Islam than their parents practiced, one that is focused on integration into Western European society and viewed more positively by the wider population (Foner & Alba, 2008:386).

And European Islam: Today, a culture is being developed with Europeans and the Muslims in Europe. Experts started to use the "European Islam"[1] to define this situation quarter-century ago. The primary expressions used in this definition are "citizenship", "contribution", and "partnership" (Ramadan, 2013). "What kind of Islam do we want", mentioned above, is important in this phase. The East-West opposition has increased the distance between the parties all along the history (Hourani, 2010:19-83). However, parties are required to create a new common culture due to the necessity of living together.

9/11, 2001 and Charlie Hebdo attacks become an important milestone for building a common culture. The Muslims have shown a significant reaction to the Charlie Hebdo attack, happened in France in 7 January[2]. The reaction of *"not in my name"* is an effective response against the violence. This response is an indication of European citizenship at the same time.

Today, "how to live together" question is on the agenda within a double process. One of them is enlargement and accession process of Eastern Europe countries. The other one is cultural conflict process with Islamic difference (Göle, 2010:40). At this process, while "How should be a European Muslim" has been discussed, on the other hand, a hybrid culture has been created in the heart of the Europe. In this culture, for example, an Arabic Muslim migrant can have three identities at the same time: An European Muslims in religious terms, a Syrian Arab in ethnical term and a German citizen in political terms (Tibi, 2004).

4. Result

The "Religious pluralism" constitutes one of the main parts of the sociology of the European continent. And the Muslims living in Europe can develop a discourse based on religious pluralism. But there are some problems between the Muslims with regard to the religious pluralism. These arise from: Europe and Muslim population. While Europe shows protection reflexes to protect their identity against the Islamic identity, the Muslims build on their identities on opposition to Europe.

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[1] Scholars approach in Turkey to the concept of "European Islam" -regarding the changes on Muslim identity in Europe- in two ways. The first group evaluates the "European İslam" as a planned policy and a new version of the old assimilation policies. The second group with an optimistic approach, considers this phenomenon as a natural process of social change and Islam will be better understood in this way. See. Sıddık Ağçoban, Scholars' Approach to Concept of "European Islam" in Turkey, "*12th Conference of the European Sociological Association 2015: Differences, Inequalities and Sociological Imagination*" (http://programme.esa12thconference.eu/presentation/2571) retrieved: 24.11.2015. And as one from the second gorup, see. Canatan, 2005)
And in this study, some data of this conference have been used, which are provided verbally.
[2] See. (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30710883) 10.11.2015.

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However, Muslim population develops a rapid awareness process for leaving defensive discourse and developing common culture. This pave the way for Europe to develop a softer language. The most important factor which slows down this process is the radical Islamic tendencies. The alternative of the radicalism is a civilian identity, which encompasses everything, basing on the cultural pluralism. Muslims are not assimilated, except for a small part (See. Kaya, and Kentel, 2005:69). Most of them support harmony. The Muslims which support harmony change the traditional discourse.

Provided that the discourse based on the perception of absolute religion is related to the concept of pluralism and the increase in participation in other religious rituals to the "religious tolerance"- In the last remark it could be said here about Muslim identity in Europe: On the one hand there continue the tenet of religious pluralism to remain under the strong influence of traditional Islamic discourse but on the other discourse based on religious tolerance is now developing rapidly.

A European form of Islam can solve Muslims' main problems to some extent regarding their transformation, adaptation and integration issues. However, many Muslims believe that Europe is not sincere about the Islam. The excessive number of them is pointing out that the ultimate solution is still not too close.

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