Islam's disruptive visibility in the European public space

Political stakes and theoretical issues

Nilüfer Göle
11 October 2013

Contemporary Islam in Europe, its modes of public expression and the visibility of associated religious signs and symbols all raise questions concerning the values of the European public sphere. And yet, writes Nilüfer Göle, religious agency itself remains a blind spot in the public debate.

The appearance of Islam in European public debates over the last three decades invites a sociological approach to religion and immigration that privileges and revisits the notion of public space. [1] Studies on state policies have contributed to our understanding of migration at different stages in the process of integration. [2] Yet, today, it seems necessary to shift away from this vertical perspective and examine public space with a focus on the horizontal dynamics of current interactions and confrontations between citizens of different religious denominations with different ways of life and cultural values. The public space then becomes a site for the unfolding of such disruptive encounters and thus an appropriate context for the expression of themes relating to Islam as raised by citizens of migrant origin. This suggests that the notion of the public space is central to the study of a particular form of Islamic expression in Europe. [3]

The public emergence of the figure of the Muslim immigrant and the appearance of religious practices and signs in varied public spaces - schools, hospitals, swimming pools, parliaments, cities - represents the entry of citizens who are practicing Muslims into public life: through religious difference, which acts like a process of singularization, they become actors. As Louis Quéré points out, social actors “do not pre-exist their configuration on the public stage; they take shape by incorporating symbolic mediations that are, by definition, public – that is to say, symbolic mediations that transcend individuals, are shared, accessible to all and are both observable and describable”. [4]

This entrance of actors onto the public stage by means of a specifically Islamic reference point disrupts the commonly shared, normative attitudes that are seen as being founded on the secular and egalitarian values of the European public sphere. The study of
contemporary Islam in Europe, its modes of public expression and the visibility of associated religious signs and symbols thus invites us to question secular doxa and the consensual and constituent values of the contemporary European public sphere. Religion, and Islam in particular, now prompts the discussion of presuppositions that underpin the European definition of the public sphere. Religious agency is the blind spot of public debate because modernity’s doxa and cognitive system do not recognize it as legitimate. In compliance with the narrative of modernity, as secularization unfolds, the religious actor is supposed to disappear and cease to be a force for social change. In theory, Islam would follow this same historical logic. In modern society, citizenship – that is to say, equal access to public space and to political life along with the guarantee of freedom of speech – is one condition of secularity.

Placing a public reading of Islam in Europe at the centre of my analysis reveals the heuristic fecundity contained within the idea of the public space. This is not to approach the public space like a receptacle, a linear approach that considers Islam solely in terms of processes of integration and participation within a given public sphere. In other words, the critical positions that currently champion the inclusion of new actors and new groups, the recognition of cultural difference and the defence of religious minority rights are founded on the political traditions of democratic pluralism and multiculturalism. [5] Yet these standpoints similarly rest upon the idea of a consensual public space, as based on the principle of a rational understanding between citizens and a public sphere regulated by the state. [6] However, I contend that we should instead reverse this gaze and see how the public appearance of Islam offers the possibility of an entirely new interpretation of the public space.

Far from freezing public space in its constituent status as communal space, I prefer instead to study the process by which this presumed basis of consensus is, in reality, continually questioned, where the democratic possibility for discord allows space for the voices of the excluded and opens up the potential for another imaginary institution of private-public, as well as national, boundaries. Only the approach that considers the public space as a place of action and experimentation – that is, as a process – allows for the questioning of pre-established public sphere doxa. Indeed, in a democracy, these kinds of lines are continually redrawn. This allows both private and transnational dynamics to expand. Thus, the philosopher Jacques Rancière analyses democracy not solely as a political entity, but as a force for excess and dissent; that is to say, democracy is a process that gives rise to tensions and negotiations and, thus, represents a “redistribution of space and time, a new arrangement of the visible and the invisible, an unprecedented flow of speech.” [7]

From this antagonistic perspective, the emergence of Islam constitutes an act of defiance with respect to the public space and, in particular, for French republican secularism. Religious forces spilling over from below (but also from above) infringe today upon the public framework outlined in the context of republicanism and neutralized by secularism. The emergence of religious actors from the private domain, combined with their membership in multiple linguistic, political, humanitarian and financial transnational groups destabilizes secular and national points of reference, thereby weakening the Republic’s sense of republican identity. Thus, policies that consist in promoting “French Islam” as opposed to “Islam in France” [8] look to sever the ties between Muslim citizens of different countries and, instead, contain these citizens within the national space. These
attempts provide evidence of the social malaise produced by the weakening of any national sense of belonging and common reference points.

The public appearance of Islam creates discord, indeed, even disunity within the national culture, triggering public debates and mobilizing passions around the constituent values of living together. However, within European countries, various approaches to democracy and the public space do not, as far as dissent is concerned, perceive Islam itself as one of the main sources of critique and, therefore, of potential alternatives. Thus, when Jacques Rancière takes a stand on the question of the hijab at school and then on the burkha, [9] he develops a critique of universalism and particularism; in other words, he reads the question of Islam in the light of racism that shines down today from above. It is not even so much a question of considering Islamic difference in terms of a form of creative dissent in politics. In a paradoxical way, Islam, believed to be a residual phenomenon of immigration, in conjunction with the composition of Europe and its enlargement to include Eastern Europe, becomes central to European “agenda-setting”, reviving public debate and mobilizing passions. [10] The history of Europe is unexpectedly moving towards questioning, in relation to Islam, Europe’s geographical and cultural boundaries. It is the confrontation with this religion that triggers simultaneously the formation of a European public sphere and a desire to preserve national borders. [11]

Islam and neo-populism

In fact, the rise of neo-populist movements illustrates well the concern over an opposition between national identity and Islam. These movements make themselves out to be the defenders of the national community against “an Islamic invasion” and, on a European scale, their political agendas and spokespersons converge around a form of partisan homogenization. The figure of Marine Le Pen, successor to her father as the head of the Front National party is a case in point. A female figure, young and dynamic, educated to be a lawyer, she presents herself as a guarantor of republican values and, brandishing the principle of secularism, she speaks out against visible manifestations of Islam. Fervent critic of the commercial trade in halal food, Marine Le Pen is particularly renowned for her comparison in November 2010 of the presence of Muslims praying on public streets to the German occupation of France during the Second World War. [12]

In their confrontation with Islam, these new public figures of neo-populist movements appropriate feminism and the fight against homophobia as well as environmentalism and animal rights causes, and even criticize antisemitism. One of the birthplaces of multiculturalism, the Netherlands, has nevertheless been marked since the beginning of the twenty-first century by the emergence of Islamophobic figures. Geert Wilders, the current leader of the far-right “Party for Freedom”, a mysterious character with unnaturally blond hair, goes so far as to increase the frequency of his trips to Israel, claiming private connections with that country, in order to give more weight to his criticism of the supposed antisemitism of Muslims.

The figures of neo-populist movements (mis)appropriate the principles of the post-'68 movement, promoting the very values to which the preceding generation of far-right, patriarchal thinkers were hostile, and thereby blur the traditional demarcations that were once considered to separate the Left and the Right. Meanwhile, some leftist intelligentsias have not only ceased to stand for traditionally leftist positions, they now
participate in denouncing the very term “Islamophobia”. [13]

By attacking visible, public signs of Islam in Europe, such as the wearing of headscarves by young women, the construction of mosques and minarets, and the distribution of halal food, as well as the ritual slaughter involved in latter’s production, the new faces of populism (issuing from the far-right) have carved out a place for themselves in public debates. Their entry into these debates in turn provides them with a visibility, and with audibility. And it is in their confrontation with Islam that they win popularity with the public.

Despite their popularity, the fact remains that these neo-populist movements represent an anti-democratic force, for they seek to stigmatize and exclude new actors. Thus, they restrict opportunities for “foreign” immigrants to become citizens. Their politics, in seeking to preserve a community of nationhood, lead to the closing down of public space and its containment within a fixed scheme of representation pre-established by the nation. The public space is thus likened to that particular community of the nation, and national and cultural references are mobilized in order to be singled out in the fight against “Islamic invasion”. These points of reference are reified in new modes of public action, as illustrated by the measures of certain groups such as the far-right Riposte laïque in France. [14]

What characterizes democracy as a political form, according to Claude Lefort, is precisely the privileged status accorded to conflict, the possibility of dissent and the importance of uncertainty for the “dissolution of the markers of certainty”. [15] In seeking to reify the lines of national identities, neo-populism abolishes this necessary room for uncertainty and thereby sabotages the democratic virtues of the public space as a place of incident, debate and exchange.

Visibility as public action

The public space has a reciprocal relationship with democracy in that it allows for the appearance of new debates and new actors. Through their capacity to interrupt the established order of power relations, new additions to the public space prompt the questioning of consensual norms. In this way, the public space offers actors a stage of visibility, including those who do not share the values of the majority and those who do not enjoy the same rights of citizenship. As in a theatre, the public space is where different actors appear on stage and learn to perform a piece together; they may find themselves in consensus, but also in confrontation. And they communicate both verbally and non-verbally. One can also think of the public space as a social text – a script that actors take ownership of, improvise with and reinvent as they seek to make the script succeed. The public sphere, like the theatre, is not a purely discursive space where opinions and words are exchanged by means of rational communication and in order to reach a consensus. It is a venue where an unpredictable social drama takes place, that portrays the singularities of individuals and the pluralism of worldviews. [16]

It is in staging the visual aspects of cultural and religious difference that Islamic actors stand out and break away from the consensual secular order. The scenography of the actors, as well as their manifestation in public life, is characterized by the performative and repetitive aspects of their action. Meanwhile, public action is not always ideological,
nor is it always the product of a collective organization, as is perhaps the case with political movements. The wearing of the Islamic headscarf (the veil or hijab) by girls in public schools and the performance of Islamic prayers in the streets of European capitals display two different modes of religious agency: on the one hand silent and, on the other, repetitive and performative. Thus, the public manifestation of the Muslim actor can be accomplished silently, sporadically and intermittently, all the while contributing to the establishment of an alternative public imagination.

To capture the process by which history and politics come into being, Cornelius Castoriadis gives a special place in his work to the imagination. For him, “history is [...] impossible and inconceivable outside of the productive or creative imagination.” Cornelius Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society, translated by Kathleen Blamey, MIT Press, 1997, 146 Indeed, as Nicolas Poirier points out, in Castoriadis’ works from the 1960s onwards, the language of praxis progressively gives way to that of the imagination as a guiding concept for the potential elucidation of society and history. [17]

Religious visibility as a mode of public agency contributes to the production of a collective imaginary and the creation of history. Staging religious signs and habits in the public space constitutes the (re)appearance of an entire repertory of actions derived from the Islamic corpus, which relates both to the Quran and Islamic tradition (sunnah). Devotional practices, insofar as they are manifested publicly, become visible to the eyes of others and are transmitted through the staging of performances as well as through images. The visibility of public agency is a vector for a communal imaginary, creating horizontal bonds of recognition between individuals who do not necessarily share the same faith or ethnic identity. Thus, practices such as the wearing of the hijab in schools, public prayer or the sale of halal food not only publicly express the presence of Muslims in Europe, they also actively contribute to the (re)production of a religious collective imagination in which Islamic actors can recognize themselves. It is public agency then – including the devotional practices of the Islamic habitus and its appearance on the secular public stage – that produces a new collective imagination. This development is the result of the modern condition of mobility, the disintegration of the links of belonging, the displacement of religion brought about through immigration and its traversing from East to West. In the context of current European immigration, Islam, as a force for the creation of social ties between people confined to a particular locality, faith and community, becomes the constituent reference point for the bond of collective imagination. Mobility and disembeddedness are the modern conditions that allow for the creation of horizontal links of social imagination through which people simultaneously recognize themselves and become aware of the existence of others. [18]

Unlike discursive modes of political action, public agency constitutes a performative mode of piety. If, with respect to the former, it is the production of an ideological corpus by a minority that constitutes the repertory of action, for the latter it is the construction of a collective imagination that is shared by the greater number. Unlike ideas, images more easily circulate and cross over national borders and linguistic barriers. Public agency can thus be revealed in a sporadic and intermittent manner, whereas political action necessarily seeks rational and sustainable organization. And, finally, if adversarial political action posits the transformation of the social world as its ultimate goal, public agency reveals the actor and, in this way, indirectly ushers in the institution of an alternative imagining of the social world, thereby disruptively affecting the established
order.

The emergence of a pious public actor works like a snapshot in our imagination, a controversial event that has the effect of destabilizing established categories and boundaries. [19] Like in an artistic event or happening, the “Islamic performance” is staged in a nearly instantaneous and spontaneous manner. A true repertory of religious acts has now produced a disruptive effect on the established order of public life. As Erving Goffman has written, ruptures of social frameworks (“frame breaks”) are introduced by those from below and are actions that seek to disturb and discredit an adversary. [20] Their eruption ensues from a breach of the site of social contact, which tests the limits of the secular neutrality of public space. [21]

Discord is not always produced by speech and/or a written corpus but can also be observed in the corporeal manifestation of the Muslim actor and his religious difference in the public space – a site to which he previously did not have access. The public space is not a place open to everyone; on the contrary, it is reserved for some and forbidden to others. [22] And the entry of pious Muslim actors into the public space violates these unacknowledged rules and weakens consensual norms. From this angle, visibility is then a form of public agency that plays an active role in the emergence of dissent and the opening up of an area of conflict and confrontation. In its phenomenological dimension, public agency introduces another concept of politics, thus leading to a redefinition of politics itself. [23]

For Etienne Tassin, the rehabilitation of the phenomenality of politics relates to public agency and the appearance of actors. As he wrote, one can in fact identify, “three virtues characteristic of political action: the revelation of an agent through action and speech; the linking together of actors; and the institution of a space of appearance or occurrence that unfolds via the consensual act.” [24] The definition of the public space as a space of appearance leads us to a new understanding of political struggle and the struggle for visibility. From this perspective, one acquires citizenship via action and appearance. The courage to appear, which, according to Arendt, consists in abandoning the shelter of the private sphere in order to appear in the public space, is proof of citizenship. Through reintroducing Arendt’s idea about the role of ordinary heroes in the phenomenology of politics, Tassin helps us to establish the relationship between public appearance and political action. In this way, the politics of visibility are brought to light.

From this perspective, the public space is not merely a place of regulation, where the Republic unfolds in the image of the state, where rational and legal procedures are laid bare: it is rather a place where social actors confront and reinvent the standards and forms of common life. With this interpretation of the public sphere, we approach the idea that society is created by social movements. According to Alain Touraine, social movements lie at the heart of the wisdom of human societies that “have the ability not only to reproduce or even adapt their learning mechanisms and political decision-making in a changing environment but also, and above all, that are able to create guidelines and to change them – to generate their objectives and their normativity”. [25] Through this emphasis on social movements, the actor becomes an actor in affirmation of his or her collective identity; in other words, he or she becomes an actor through the naming of their adversary and the defining issues of their struggle. [26] But, unlike the theory of social movements, the notion of the public sphere developed in this article through the
prism of Islam offers a definition of actor and action that is not reducible to a dimension of collective identity.

In adopting the perspective of the public sphere, one approaches the question of agency differently. In this approach, the actor does not exist prior to his action but is revealed through his public appearance and actions. It is the action-appearance that reveals the actor. In the words of Louis Quéré, “the public space […] is first and foremost a phenomenal reality, a reality that happens, that manifests itself as a perceptible phenomenon through social practices.” [27] In public agency, the actor remains a person rather than being dissolved in the anonymity of collective action. Her public protest can be made in a personal and singular way. The act is embodied, dwelling in a form and a place. The corporeal and spatial aspects of public agency are constituents of the definition of social action. The conflict does not play out between two actors as in the case of a social movement but is presented for public judgment, which is always plural. [28] In public agency, dissent, produced in this case by religious difference, does not act as an affirmation of a collective identity that precedes the action. This difference takes shape or becomes visible insofar as devotional practices are manifested in a personal, corporeal and spatial manner. The negotiation between personal piety and public appearance constitutes a source of perpetual tension, reflexivity and readjustment for the actor; after all, religion is not a given category that can be acquired and fixed, but demands perpetual work, learning, discipline and surveillance. Particularly within a secular European context, Islamic piety demands a constant monitoring of faith and active self-presentation in public. [29]

This personal dimension, embodied and elaborated through Islamic difference, does not signify a process of “individuation” of Islam and an absence of the collective. On the contrary, the appearance of Islam in public contributes to a collective imaginary and makes for dynamic membership in an imagined community where one participates in the production of a distinctive religious habitus. The definition of action as the production of a way of life, of religious habitus, is further reinforced by the Islamic corpus. In the Muslim tradition or sunnah, Islam valorizes mimetic mechanisms of learning; specifically, it teaches the emulation of the Prophet in his words and his deeds. The sunnah provides a shared medium, a repertory for Muslims everywhere in the world, that enables a symbolic connection with the genesis of Islam and functions as the common reference point in their religious discourse, as in the formation of an imaginary community. [30] There is an interdependent relationship and proximity between the notion of visibility and the struggle for recognition. Even though the two terms often intersect in the social sciences, we must distinguish the term of visibility from the concept of recognition. [31] Not every social group benefits from the same public attention. For example, feminists have stressed that women’s domestic duties are not recognized as work, that their participation in social life has been obscured, and that the trace of the feminine has been consistently erased from collective memory. Feminism is the struggle against this systematic forgetting; and, at the same time, the struggle that seeks to make women visible as actresses in history.

We must therefore understand visibility as a form of public agency, rather than identifying it as a struggle for recognition by the actor. That is, visibility as a form of agency relates to the assertion that “religion” is not a pre-established category but is (trans-)formed in the passage from personal to public, in the process of “making visible”.
Moreover, this visibility does not always result from desire on the part of the actor; the actor may make it come about unwittingly, unintentionally. Devotional practices like fasting, prayer and dress are taken for granted by Muslims as religious duties. But once they become the object of public attention, these practices acquire a new aspect, even in the eyes of Muslims, that has to do with the observations, public perceptions and multiple judgments of external observers. Meanwhile, apprehension regarding any manifestation of religion as an instrument for political ends can easily lead to the politics of denial towards religion – even when political debate becomes entirely focused on the subject.

Thus we can speak of an “over-visibilization” in two senses. Public attention to Islam propels Muslims and Islamic symbols to the centre of the public space: clichés, images and representations of Islam proliferate in the spotlight. They circulate at a European level in a process of trans-nationalization. On the other hand, Islamic actors intensify their differences and render themselves more visible as they use the spotlight to gain access to the public space. Overexposure takes place, therefore, in both cases.

This “over-visibilization” takes place in opposition to civic impartiality, which is necessary to public life. Far from being an expression of concerned attention or recognition, “over-visibilization” usually represents a manifestation of social disapproval. [32]

**Spaces and crossings**

Visibility is a crucial issue in politics, which can decide the course that events take on the public stage and aid in the conquest of public space. In other words, the Muslim actor crosses the threshold of areas of life to which, formerly, immigrants were unwelcome, moving from the peripheries to the centres. Visibility is thus accompanied by a spatial transgression, which occurs where we least expected it.

It begs the question: when and how do religious symbols disrupt and become visible to the public gaze? The headscarves of “grandmothers” and “immigrant women” are hardly visible to the public because the former remain at home and the latter belong to the underprivileged classes of society. Both are given a special public status, tinged with nostalgia, which renders their gestures docile, innocent examples of religious expression, a kind of automatic, traditional gesture, reminiscent of the rusticity of peasant life. The meaning of the headscarf changes, acquires a visibility, when it becomes associated with Islamic political action and the public appearance of women. [33] In this context, piety loses its innocence: most notably, when observed in places of education such as schools and universities. The semantic shift of the word *headscarf* in discussions about the veil and the *hijab* illustrates the anxiety that is associated with seeking to understand, to name, this new phenomenon. On the other hand, this shift also reflects a move backwards in terms of an exogenous Islamic lexicon. In a paradoxical way, the recent experiences of young veiled girls reveal the depth of their integration relative to their mothers, particularly in terms of their access to education and their influence in the national arena. If we follow Arendt’s notion of the public space, the manifestation of religious action reveals the Muslim actor (or actress), which is proof of citizenship. Simultaneously, this mode of visibility disobeys the prevailing norms at school, which is the quintessential place for the production and transmission of the secular values of citizenship.
The construction of mosques and minarets in European countries follows a process similar to the indigenization of immigrants and the “visibilization” of Islam. [34] There exists everywhere in Europe numerous Islamic centres and prayer rooms, most of which are constructed in an improvised manner. These structures exist in significant numbers. However, the presence of mosques and their minarets is now a source of increasing controversy and resentment, as illustrated in the debate surrounding the 2009 referendum in Switzerland and the ensuing legislation to prohibit the construction of minarets. Mosques are generally impromptu and hidden, constructed without distinguishing marks, housed in unrecognizable buildings and in old, abandoned industrial areas and, therefore, do not pose a serious threat in terms of visibility. They do not represent a public nuisance. On the other hand, it is “the signs of Islamic exceptionalism such as the dome and the minaret” [35] that singularize the cultural difference of Islam in city centres, thereby posing problems to the public.

The public sphere is not an abstract entity, unchanged by the marks of power. On the contrary, citizens battle to control and direct the public sphere, both in terms of its norms and its forms. There is a hierarchy of spaces according to their proximity to, or distance from, its centre, which is the site of production for the values, wealth and power maintained by elites. There are spaces found on the margins of cities and, furthermore, there are provincial cities and world cities. The public sphere is crisscrossed by such spatial hierarchies, which run from the centre to the periphery. The current issue of Islamic visibility appears in the centre-spaces, which are also being redefined by it. While the Muslim remains confined to her suburb, to her place of work and to the city’s industrial zones, religious signs and symbols do not acquire visibility; they are far from public scrutiny and thus are perpetuated amid general indifference. It is their visibility in places normally reserved for the production of elites which creates confrontation.

Not every space is a public space. It is through the action and appearance of actors that a space may acquire a public dimension. The manifestation of Islamic action thus brings all kinds of diverse spaces, such as schools, streets, hospitals and prisons, under public scrutiny. These spaces are tangibly invested with a sense of being public insofar as they host confrontation between norms and actors. For example, when actors reclaim Islamic prescriptions regarding beaches and pools by conforming – though inflecting the meaning of it – to the Islamic precept concerning the segregation of the sexes, they give these places the status of public (leisure) spaces. These examples demonstrate that a public space is not established once and for all but is formed, revealed and unfolded through the action of actors and the appearance of difference.

We can distinguish notions of space that operate on different levels: space as a tangible place, as counterpublics, as a public stage and as a public sphere. In this article, I have privileged the notion of the public space as a public stage; in other words, I have focussed on space as a stage for the appearance for Islamic actors and controversial events, as opposed to the notion of space as a public sphere. Although the two can be complementary, the public sphere refers more to mediation between citizens and the state. As Louis Quéré writes, “the notion of the public space consists in two basic ideas: that of a public sphere for free expression, communication and discussion, which constitutes a body that mediates between civil society and the state, between citizens and politico-administrative power; and that of a public stage, that is to say, a scene for occurrences, where actors, as well as actions, events and social problems come into
public visibility.” [36]

Subaltern social groups, which remain unrecognized on account of their gender, colour, and sexual or religious orientation, set themselves up in alternative places, where they invent their own critical discourse. Withdrawal from the “official” public sphere is a condition for the creation of alternative spaces, that is, anti-public spaces that allow subaltern classes an opportunity to invent new modes of sociability, both linguistic and practical. [37] In the case of Islam in Europe, counterpublics play an important role in the learning and interpretation of religious texts and in the shared acquisition of a pious habitus. These discursive and performative counterpublics draw attention to the public sphere. For example, there are calls to regulate, according to Islamic prescription, the ritual slaughter involved in the production of halal food on European territory. Unlike Kosher certification, which is associated with the diet of a religious minority, this issue is capturing public attention and becoming a controversy, particularly as a result of the debate launched by animal rights groups and their campaigns against the suffering inflicted on animals through ritual slaughter, which precludes the stunning of animals prior to slaughter. Florence Bergeaud-Blackler and Anne-Marie Brisebarre call attention to how the observance of a ritual that concerns only believers enters societal debate, [38] highlighting the difficulties that arise when a practitioner finds herself confronted with social settings, such as the school or the professional world, where the Islamic precept is not welcome. It is in consideration of such issues that I prefer to focus on the notion of the public space as a stage for actors and events, via which I can then traverse controversies provoked at a societal level.

**The exhibition and concealment of the sacred**

Islam in Europe becomes visible only to the extent that it stands out, that it gets noticed. Debates that concern the wearing of the hijab, the construction of mosques and minarets and the production and sale of halal food are all distinctive signs of attempts to single out the experience of Muslims in Europe. Visibility relates primarily to unfamiliar forms, both in terms of architecture and clothing. A new semantics (hijab, burkha, minaret and halal) enters the European lexicon as a result of the quest to name these unfamiliar forms. Islamic prescriptions constitute a user manual that provides guidance for the passage from private to public, by setting out religious norms like piety, purity and modesty in daily life.

However, the appearance of associated practices in public is inseparable from their definition as a set of practices that always relate to the private sphere, to intimacy, to the sacred. In the case of Islam, relations between the visible and the invisible are invested with a particular tension, due to the importance of the “eye” to definitions of what is lawful and unlawful. In other words, the “visibilization” of religion brings about contradictions, unexpected repercussions and subversive effects.

Every step towards public visibility threatens the very Islamic precept making its appearance. Expressions of purity, modesty and piety are confronted by market forces, media representations and the tyrannies of transparency, desire and fashion. An “over-visibilization” of religious signs, ostentatious forms of piety, and the imperatives of world trade shatter a sense of the sacred.
The veil, an instrument of modesty, must both conceal the body and reflect gender segregation in society. The interior space, like the veil, embodies an entire theology to do with maintaining the purity of women. Paradoxically, it is the space hidden from the gaze of others, the realm of feminine intimacy, which defines what is forbidden or not. Private – a word without a synonym in Muslim culture – refers to the sphere of the sacred, the interior, as well as to intimacy, but also to a gendered space better encapsulated by the word mahrem. [39] The Islamic veil relates to a forbidden exterior masculine gaze on women and marks the boundaries between interior and exterior that also symbolize the segregation of the sexes. Its public manifestation challenges concerns about invisibility, modesty and self-concealment.

Paradoxically, although the veil is intended to protect women from the anonymous gazes of men, in Europe it now in fact focuses attention on them. This public fixation on the veil as a distinctive symbol of Islam propels the women who wear it to the forefront of the public stage, in spite of their lack of desire for attention and their efforts to remain hidden. On the other hand, the veil is entering progressively into the world of fashion and the beauty market and thus increasingly plays a role in religious aestheticism. As such, it is submitting to an erosion of its original intent and entering into contradiction with the meaning of the Islamic precept regarding modesty.

Public prayer follows a similar logic. It has become a mode of religious public action, for it manifests the presence of Muslims in Europe. But public prayer generates contradictory systems of logic in terms of the visibility and concealment of faith. The staging of prayer as a form of public agency triggers concerns and criticism among the non-Muslim population. For example, in Italy, collective prayers were held in January of 2009 on the Piazza del Duomo in Milan, facing the cathedral, and on the Piazza Maggiore in Bologna, following protests against the invasion of the Gaza strip by the Israeli army: these prayers have been perceived as a kind of Islamic occupation by certain Italian Catholics and political parties. [40] The public nature of such prayer risks weakening its religious meaning, not only in the eyes of non-Muslims, who experience it as a symbol of politicization and Islamic invasion, but also in the eyes of many Muslims. According to Muslim belief, faith need not be expressed or displayed publicly but, instead, should be practiced with discretion. The idea that faith is not to be exposed in an ostentatious manner – that, indeed, the believer ought to conceal her piety – is especially prevalent in certain Sufi denominations. They assert that ostentation, or promoting the opinion of others, in the exhibition of faith can lead to a loss of sincerity and hypocrisy (or riya). Thus, on account of such pitfalls, there are religious schools that encourage their disciples to use complete discretion when performing certain prayers with the aim of perfecting their faith. [41]

In becoming a European phenomenon, Islam exacerbates the paradox of visibility and invisibility. And mosques do not escape this paradoxical process. The production of places of prayer in basements and garages raises the question: what kind of visibility do we attribute to prayer? On the one hand, there is an ambition to build mosques with distinctive signs and architectural forms that are designed to stand out. On the other, there are concerns over the need for simplicity and discretion as regards faith. Strategies for visibility can be interpreted as posing a contradiction for spirituality and faith, which results in an ostentatious struggle to leave a mark on the European public space, thus transforming religion into a sign of power.
Chronotopes

The public sphere presents a particular time-space relationship; as a space of appearance, assembly and debate between citizens, it is formed in the “here and now”, and in a specific language community. The appearance of Islam produces a disruptive effect in this “time-space” of the public sphere.

Islamic actors make their appearance in European public life and spaces from “elsewhere”: they reference sites outside publicly established boundaries. Their stories and life trajectories pass through their parents’ country of origin via language and satellite television at home but, sometimes, also via their participation in religious and transnational networks. Their eruption in the public sphere immediately signifies a transgression of national borders and also functions as a source of perpetual suspicion regarding their place of belonging and loyalty to the host country. They are here but also there. Their names relate them to the origins of their parents and label them as the “product” of immigration; consequently, the nation does not fully include them or recognize them as citizens. Their mere presence signifies the influx, across national borders, of those from other countries: the emergence of a “Middle East” in Europe. In the context of which, transnational aspects may come into play with regard to the peacetime activities of commerce, entertainment, communication and humanitarian organizations – but also with regard to terrorist networks. The persistence of the transnational dimensions of immigration is often seen as a symptom of failing to integrate but also as a sign of one’s overall adherence to Islam and, even, to international terrorism. September 11, 2001 was the revealing event, if ever there was one, of the violent eruption of Islam in the heart of Western hegemony. Islam, repressed as “medieval” and “obscurantist”, has resurfaced in the Western world.

As in the case of space, temporality becomes a site of protest and confrontation. At the same time as coming to the fore in the contemporary European world, Islam reveals its anachronism in relation to that world. The public expression of Islam through everyday signs and symbols recalls the long durée of religion, or even its immutability. The actors of Islam create a socio-religious imagination by engaging with the present moment and simultaneously building, in a genealogical manner, chains of continuity with the prophetic tradition. Sunnah can introduce another kind of temporality that, in the present, turns towards the Islamic Golden Age (Asr-i Saadet) at the time of Muhammad. Sunnah, which refers to the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, acts like a complement to divine revelation, or the message of the Quran, by providing a common matrix, a repertory, that connects Muslims with the genesis of Islam and protects them from the deceptions of modern society. Religious action as a “memory chain”, [42] which is broken by the conditions of immigration and acculturation, is thus reactivated by Muslim actors.

Through the appearance of Islam, it is the secular and national “time-space” of the European public sphere that is undergoing a loss of certainty regarding its points of reference. And it is precisely at such a juncture that, once again, it becomes conceivable that all human and social action unfolds in a defined “time-space” – which we can call a chronotope, following the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, the author who also introduced polyphony, dialogism and the carnivalesque into the public sphere.
I use the notion of chronotope, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, in order to better understand the anachronistic contemporaneity of Islam in European public spaces. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope, which translates literally as “time-space”, is the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” He maintains that “[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” Bakhtin considers time a fourth dimension of space and chronotopes as cognitive concepts that are integral parts of the perceptions and consciousness of a series of events. He takes the Kantian definition of space and time as indispensable forms for any cognitive system, as sources of knowledge and opportunities for experience. However, Bakhtin diverges from Kant by considering space and time not as transcendental forms but as forms that belong to a more immediate reality.

Bakhtin defines chronotopes as socio-cultural constructions that are essential to generating the plots, the stories of history and fiction. This socio-cultural and anthropological definition allows us to make use of his literary concept in our approach to the public space. The notion of chronotope, which suggests a variety of competing “nows” embedded in different spaces, proves ingenious for exploring the complexity of the contemporary experience and for understanding the contemporaneity of social experience that is lived along different rhythms of time. For if we see social reality from a Bakhtinian perspective, we can observe that times and spaces are social products and that diverse groups of individuals fashion qualitatively different ideas of “time-space”. In this sense, chronotopes can be considered a mediator of human experience, some coexisting alongside one another and some contradicting one another.

The public sphere raises the question of spatial proximity and the temporality of the present. Contemporaneity is not merely a chronological experience of time, but a political occurrence of recognition between actors, which is a dynamic relationship that carries with it the means to accomplish and to build. It is an experience that draws people close and makes them feel close. In the European context, where the comfort of distance is lost and practices are synchronized, proximity to Islam (as a democratic encounter that can draw people closer together) is an issue that emerges forcefully. More than any other region in the world, it is Europe where the issue of Islam’s contemporaneity is set up as a crucial question upon which the future depends. This confrontational encounter acts as a manifestation of proximity. By using a Bakhtinian notion of chronotopes as mediators of human experience, we can go one step further and, in recognizing the heterogeneity of human action, rid the public space of its connotations of homogeneity, thereby opening it up to the invention of the social.

Bibliography

Bergeaud-Blackler, F. and A.-M. Brisebarre, “Cachez cet halal qu’on ne saurait voir”,
Thématiques, Hors Série de la Nouvelle Vie Ouvrière 3 (Summer 2005): 36-7.

Footnotes

1. I have shown how the rise of Islamic studies changes the agenda of the social sciences and, in particular, our reading of the public space in Europe. See Nilüfer Göle, “L’Islam à la rencontre des sciences sociales”, in Michel Wieviorka (ed.), Les Sciences Sociales en mutation, Editions Sciences Humaines, 2007, 417-26.


3. I have conducted a research project, entitled “Europublicislam”, on the visibility of Islam in different European countries. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Community’s Seven Framework Program. See the project’s official website at europublicislam.hypotheses.org/

5. I wrote an article that highlights the correlation between the emergence of Islam in European public debate and the disappearance of multiculturalism as a framework for thinking about difference. Today, we witness the de-legitimization of multiculturalism in confrontation with Islam, and this constitutes a new national political stance in European countries. Göle, “L'Islam à la rencontre des sciences sociales”, op. cit.

6. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, MIT Press, 1989; also by the same author, "L'espace public, 30 ans après", Quaderni 18, 1992, 161-91. At the heart of his conception of the public space, Jürgen Habermas introduces the idea of Öffentlichkeit, which suggests that all citizens participate in directing the common interest via their access to the public space through a discourse of reason.


8. The French Council of the Muslim Faith was created on 13 April 2003 under the direction of Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior. The institutionalization of a national body that puts often divergent Muslim associations into one grouping marks a turning point in the relations between Islam and the state in France.


12. Controversy erupted over the Myrha street mosque in the 18th arrondissement of Paris: the cramped quarters of the building was not able to accommodate all of the believers on Fridays, and some attending the mosque would conduct their prayers in the surrounding streets. Until the Marine Le Pen's statement, this kind of religious use of public space was regarded as a matter of religious tolerance by the municipality.

13. Recently, the writer Pascal Bruckner called for the term "Islamophobia" to be banned on the grounds that it was an invention of Islamists (Pascal Bruckner, "L'invention de l'islamophobie", an opinion piece published in the newspaper Libération, on 23 November 2010).

14. In 2010, this association planned to celebrate General de Gaulle's Appeal of 18 June on rue de la Goutte d'Or, close to the Myrha street mosque in the middle of a predominantly Maghrebi and African district of Paris, with a traditional saucisson et pinard in order to offend the Muslim inhabitants of the neighbourhood (Mouloud
Akkouche, "Quand l'apéro saucisson-pinard devient discriminatoire," which appeared in the newspaper Rue89 on 14 June 2010.

15. Claude Lefort, Essai sur le politique : XIXe-XXe siècles, Seuil, 2001; L'invention démocratique, les limites de la domination totalitaire, Fayard, 1994


17. Nicolas Poirier, L'ontologie politique de Cornélius Castoriadis: Création et Institution, Payot, 2009, 244


21. See my article, "Islam in Public: New Visibilities and New Imaginaries", Public Culture 14, no. 2 (2002): 173-90, in which I examine the significance of the entrance, for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic, of a female delegate who wears the veil and is a member of a pro-Islamic party (Fazilet Partisi) into the Turkish parliament in April 1999. The emergence of this veiled female political figure, Merve Kavakçi, raised a wave of protest from leftist delegates and the press, with calls to maintain the principle of laicité in Turkey. Ultimately, she was stripped of her citizenship.

22. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to a Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", Social Text 25/26 (1990): 56-80


24. See Etienne Tassin's chapter in the aforementioned volume.


26. Ibid., 9

27. Louis Quéré, "L'espace public", op. cit, 80


29. For a study of the modes of self-discipline and the process of apprenticeship among pious Muslim women, see Jeanette Jouili, Devenir Pieuse: Femmes musulmanes en France et Allemagne entre réforme de soi et quête de reconnaissance, PhD thesis, Ecole


32. Ibid., 17


36. Quéré, "Espace public", op. cit., 76-7

37. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", op. cit., 67

38. F. Bergeaud-Blackler and A.-M. Brisebarre, "Cachez cet halal qu'on ne saurait voir", *Thématiques, Hors Série de la Nouvelle Vie Ouvrière* 3 (Summer 2005): 36-7


44. Ibid.


**Published 11 October 2013**

Original in **French**

First published in **Sens public 15-16 (2013) (French version); Eurozine (English version)**

Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/islams-disruptive-visibility-in-the-european-public-space/)

© Nilüfer Göle / Eurozine