Gods, Humans and Religions 18

In-Between Spaces

Christian and Muslim Minorities in Transition in Europe and the Middle East

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Preface

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Whereas from the 19th century on sociologists thought that through modernisation societies would turn away from religion and become thoroughly secularised, these ideas are now questioned by the emergence of all kinds of phenomena that are framed by religious contexts. We are even witnessing a rise in conflicts globally that issue from the concerns of religious instances about the state, politics, society and ethics. News coverage around the world shows that secularisation is not a global phenomenon and that religion is still at the heart of many people's understanding of the world.

Through the process of globalisation, in which increased migration and advanced possibilities of communication are major factors, the socio-cultural and religious landscape has undergone major modifications worldwide. Religion and religious movements in general have come to the fore, but also religious minorities have gained importance in influencing cultural, social, juridical, political and economic issues of the societies in which they are embedded. Through the processes related to globalisation, people are informed of and connected with events happening all over the world and feel affected and influenced by them. Religious minorities – be they recent or centuries-old communities – are no longer ensconced within their local communities, but connected through global mechanisms that form the contemporary religious landscape.

From a religious historical perspective, the relation between Europe and the Middle East has been both important and tumultuous for more than a thousand years. In both regions, the religious minorities of Europe and the Middle East found their place and often stayed connected through historical and/or religious ties to the other region. Several large Christian communities remained in the Middle East after the Islamisation of the region. Recent migration flows from Mediterranean countries brought Islam into Europe. Muslim communities with diverging regional and ideological backgrounds are becoming more and more part of the European landscape.

From the 19th century onwards, it is the state that has constituted the main framework for social, cultural and religious belonging. From the

20th century onwards this has also applied to the Middle East. But the growing cultural, ideological and religious diversity within these states – often caused by migration and democratisation – contributed to the questioning of the concept of the 'nation-state'. Borne by the globally accepted discourse of 'identity as a right', religious communities enter the public domain in order to make collective claims. A crucially important consequence of this is that the moral basis for social solidarity needs to be reinterpreted. Rather than national ideologies, transnational ideologies and feelings of religious belonging are increasingly affecting local life and providing the basis for moral solidarity. A dynamic that is witnessed both in Europe as in the Middle East, although their respective historical relation towards Christianity and Islam is quite different.

As stated before, the historical context of Christian minorities in the Middle East and Muslim minorities in Europe is quite different. Christianity dominated the Middle East before Islam came into existence. On the other hand, Muslim minorities are relative newcomers in Western Europe; the majority have entered Europe from the second half of the previous century onwards, in the context of labour and chain migration. Another relevant difference is their juridical position – the status of their citizenship – within society. The problematic position of a religious minority in the Middle East is fundamentally *juridical* in its essence, sometimes with social consequences. The problematic position of a minority in Western Europe is fundamentally *social* in its essence, sometimes with legal restrictions for expressions at the cultural level too (e.g. language, aspects of religion).

Notwithstanding these differences between the position of Muslims in Europe and Christians in the Middle East, due to their different historical background and material, sociological and political circumstances, it is thought-provoking to look at them simultaneously. The minority position of both is subject to processes related to the current unprecedented technological evolution, to geopolitical and geo-religious changes and major migration flows. These dynamics provide us with some relevant comparative insights.

This book, *Christian and Muslim Minorities in Transition in Europe and the Middle East* is the result of a three-day international workshop organised by UCSIA in December 2007, to investigate – from an interdisciplinary perspective – mirror experiences of Christian and Muslim religious minorities both in Europe and the Middle East in their changing relationship with the majority culture and the way global influences incite them to rethink and adapt their position in society. During the workshop, evidence was found that the influence of globalisation gives way to a shift in position of minorities in their relationship to main-

stream society, in which religion plays a key role. We also witness a reinterpretation of the minority issue in itself and a repositioning of minority communities within the dominant strand of society. The interaction between global and local contexts provokes new dynamics in the minority issue and demands a renewed academic analysis.

This book consists of four parts in which the first two focus on religious minorities respectively in the Middle East (Part I) and in Europe (Part II). A comparison between both parts shows that the different historical perspective is crucial for understanding the current situation of Muslim and Christian minorities within Europe and the Middle East. Part III deals with the tremendous impact of virtual communication on the identity and opportunities of religious minority communities, both in Europe and the Middle East. In the final part IV we focus on some aspects of the emerging 'European Islam'. Contrary to Eastern Christianity, 'Western Islam' is a relatively new phenomenon which provides some opportunities for creative methodologies in interpreting religious texts within the context of a challenging non-Muslim society.

The first part "The issue of plurality in the Middle East" focuses on the Mashreq and on Turkey. An important characteristic of the Christian minorities in the Middle East is that their presence predates that of the contemporary Muslim majority. Their status crumbled over the centuries from being at the centre of the main institutions of power to – in several countries – the very edge of extinction. Their affiliation with the West became more important over the last centuries, first through colonial association and later migration. The contributions in this part stress the importance of this historical legacy in their positioning towards the surrounding society, including other religious minorities, and the construction of their religious minority identity.

In "Matching modernity with traditional tolerance; the politics of religious diversity in the Middle East" Dick Douwes gives a historical perspective of the situation of religious minority groups in a predominantly Islamic Middle East. He draws our attention to the wide variety of Christian, Jewish and other religious traditions that have survived fourteen centuries of Muslim predominance. Moreover, the variation within Islam in the Middle East was – and still is – remarkably high when compared to other Muslim majority regions. Apparently, traditional rule supported religious differentiation. Yet, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, religious affiliation, and with it religious differentiation, was increasingly contested within the contexts of colonialism, nation building and migration. For non-Muslim communities affiliation with the West, through colonial association and later migration, through religious and/or economic orientation, has increased sharply to the

extent that some communities actually exist in 'both worlds', some having become mainly manifest in the West. Yet, their main '*raison d'être*' is rooted in the Middle East, as their religious habitat.

In the second contribution on "The Christian Minorities in Iraq: the Question of Religious and Ethnic Identity", Herman Teule starts with the recent appeals to the international community by Iraqi church leaders on the alarming situation of the members of all Christian denominations in central Iraq. Besides the factual information on the precarious position of the different Christian groups in contemporary Iraq, this case study also gives insight into the dynamics in which Christian minorities in the Middle East in general have to be situated. For example, central issues such as the relation between ethnicity and religion, the acceptance or rejection of '*urūba*, inner Christian divisions, the relationship with the Muslim environment, the role of the Diaspora and the relevance of the Christian community for the society at large are relevant for a better understanding of the (future of the) Christian communities in the Middle East and Turkey where comparable issues play a pivotal role. This brings us to the next article.

In his paper "At the limits of toleration: how have non-Muslim minorities been constructed as 'strangers' in Turkey?" Ali Soner explores the roots of today's minority-majority categorisation in Turkey going back to the Ottoman millet system in which people's legal, political and social position was determined not on the basis of their ethno-linguistic and numerical characteristics but on religious differences. This historical background might explain why expression of ethno-linguistic and sectarian differences of the Turkish-Muslim society has been disregarded, avoided and found unacceptable in the eyes of the Republican rulers and of the general society. He argues further that the Ottoman millet system was not a model based on an egalitarian treatment of differences. Following the Islamic practices and principles of the doctrine of *dhimma*, the presence of the 'other' was related to and conditioned by non-egalitarian obligations and communal loyalty to be paid to the state and acceptance of a legal and social position lower than that of the Muslims. Ali Soner links this historical legacy with the shaky legal and social position non-Muslim minority groups in Turkey have, even after gaining citizenship status with the Lausanne Peace Treaty.

Fulya Dogruel focuses in "Multiple identities on the border: Christian and Muslim Arab minority communities in Turkey" on the dynamics behind identity formations of two minority communities, namely the Arab Orthodox Christians and Arab Alawite Muslims living in Antioch (Antakya), which is situated in South-Eastern Turkey, on the border with Syria. Dogruel explores how historical events, social relationships,

human action, urban life and national and global developments are the 'real' factors that create, maintain and transform the ethnic identities of these communities in Antioch. This case study shows how national and global politics have a direct influence on the social imagination of minority communities about their future in terms of becoming equal citizens under the protection of the state's national and international policies, especially at a time when discussions on ethnicity in Turkey are a hot topic in regard to accession to the European Union. This contribution leads us to the second part of the book in which we take a closer look at the situation of religious (Muslim) minorities in Europe.

In the second part: "The issue of minority in Europe" we look into the situation of religious minorities, more specifically Muslim minorities in Europe. Contrary to the Christian minorities in the Middle East, Muslims are – at least in Western Europe – relatively newcomers. From the 1960s in the last century, they arrived mainly as immigrants and over the following decades they became more aware of their collective religious identity. In Western Europe, Muslim communities are no longer a peripheral phenomenon but are at the centre of public debate. The growing importance of Western European Muslim communities impacts on their relation with the Middle East. The cases presented focus mainly on the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium.

In his introduction "Migration, ethno-religious groups and integration in Europe" Tariq Modood explores the implications of the growing ethnic and religious diversity within the European landscape. He states that in the 20th century the United States was conceived as a land of racial and ethnic diversity but Europe still thought of itself as a continent of 'white' nation-states. 21st century Europe, however is going to be more like the US – with the additional difference that the principal minority will be Muslims and the principal fault-line will not be black-white but secular/Christian-Muslim. Tariq Modood asks what form integration should take in this socio-political landscape. What implications are there for a continent that thinks it is 'secular' but where state support for religion is routine; and for Christianity as a cultural marker of Europe?

In the contribution "A religious and feminine counter-discourse in Flanders revealed", Els Vanderwaeren explores the role of Islam in the daily life of young and highly educated Muslim women with a migrant background. The paper reveals how Muslim youngsters of Moroccan origin in Flanders who are member of a Diaspora community go through a particular and intense search for, and discussion of, identity, which has implications for their religious identity. Here, special attention will be given to gender differences and how they influence the construction of

(religious) identity. Specifically, Vanderwaeren examines religious interpretations among these female Muslims and how these are used as leverages for emancipation. The author points to the significant potential for religious renewal that those discourses and actions contain.

Also, among the 'original' Belgian population, Islam is becoming more salient as a religious identity. In "Conversion to Islam in the Belgian context: religious and/or ethnic passing?" Imam Lechkar studies how Belgians who choose to adopt another religion, and more specifically, choose to become Muslims, are confronted with shifting relationships. Prior to their conversion, they were part of the majority, members of a group that adhered to the dominant set of values and perceived the religious minority in a certain way. Once they convert to Islam, their status changes. She explores how one's decision to change religion affects the political, socio-economic, cultural and private context of the convert's life. Can we speak of a complete 'passing' or rather of an 'in between' situation in which they find themselves? Can we say that the newly adopted religion is filtered through the original language and world-view of the converts? This article demonstrates that the situation of Islam, as a minority religion in the West, is a complex phenomenon. Conversion to Islam provides an example of an additional component in this complex relationship with European society.

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Compared to Belgium, the United Kingdom already has a longer tradition with Muslim minorities due to its colonial past. In "Hip-Hop, Nasheeds and 'Cool' Sheikhs" Peter Mandaville provides an overview of the impact of popular culture on conceptions of identity and religiosity among Muslim youth in Britain in recent years. This analysis cuts across two distinct but often overlapping spaces of practice: the realm of formal Muslim organisation and movements (such as Young Muslims UK and the radical movement Hizb ut-Tahrir); and more individualised approaches to tackling the question of what it means to be a Muslim and to express Muslim identity in the prevailing, highly secularised climate. This contribution explores the relationship between the evolution of the British Muslim religious imagination (e.g. how are Islam and Muslim identity to be understood and interpreted under such conditions?) and the politics of Muslim identity as embodied in the consumption of popular culture and new forms of social mobilisation articulated in terms of the same.

The last contribution of the second part offers us a comparative perspective on the issue of Muslim minorities. In "Between participation and disengagement: Muslim minorities and their Islamic schools in

England and the Netherlands" Inga Niehaus focuses on education as one of the key areas identified by policymakers and lobby groups in the effort to integrate Muslim minorities into European societies. Statistical data from various European countries show that Muslim children are achieving less in the mainstream educational sector than non-Muslim children, which has negative effects on social cohesion within a multicultural society. In this context, the demands of Muslim minorities grew in the late 1970s to establish their own educational system with the result that Islamic schools in many European countries have mushroomed in the last twenty years. Today, England has around 120 independent Islamic schools and the Netherlands has about 40. Inga Niehaus presents the empirical results of a comparative study of selected Islamic schools in England and the Netherlands and argues that Islamic schools are highly influenced by the different religious, cultural and political settings within which they operate. The paper concludes with a critical assessment of the question whether Islamic schools promote processes of identity formation within a democratic society or whether they rather lead to disengagement from the majority society.

It is crucial to take into account the unprecedented technological revolution within the area of communication in order to grasp contemporary globalisation processes. The opportunities offered by communication technology affect religious minorities equally within Europe and the Middle East. The third part: "Virtual communication and the minority issue" deals with the impact of e- (or virtual) communication on Muslim and Christian Minorities. In his introduction Johan Leman reminds us of the impact of new technologies on the discourse and communication of religious minorities. Representations of minorities on the imaginary and virtual level are changing. Rather than national ideologies, transnational ideologies and feelings of religious belonging are increasingly affecting local life and providing a complementary basis for moral solidarity. A reflection on this is important for an understanding of the developments in the perceptions of the Self and the Other among Muslim minorities in Western Europe, and Christian minorities in the Middle East. In "Globalisation and a living Islamic identity. English Sunni e-*fatwas* on end-of-life decision making", Stef van den Branden and Bert Broeckaert present an analysis of the structure and content of English e-*fatwas* on ethical decisions concerning the end of life. Lenie Brouwer discusses in "The internet as a vehicle of empowerment: Dutch Moroccan Youths on the Islam Debate" the impact of the internet on Dutch-Moroccan youngsters in the 'computer clubhouse' in Amsterdam and on a Dutch-Moroccan website.

As Johan Leman states 'virtual communication' brings us into an "in-between" area that will not replace normal communication, but does

interfere with it. Nor will it replace existing identifications of people, but it does unavoidably impact on identity formations as they relate to the being in or out of group dynamics. The internet has the advantage that it gives 'oppressed' minority groups in various Diasporas the opportunity to cluster together and, if desired, remain in contact with group members all around the world and also in their country of provenance.

However, it seems that among both Christians and Muslims, the World Wide Web does not improve inter-religious dialogue nor reciprocal acceptance, but mostly helps to mainstream socio-cultural practices within a religious community on a transnational level. This important observation leads Johan Leman to the hypothesis that as long as major inequalities continue to exist, the internet, as used among religious minority groups, promotes homogenisation inside transnational communities, but antagonism with the 'Other'.

Eastern Christianity has been a reality for over 2000 years. On the contrary 'Western Islam' or more specifically '(West)-European Islam' is a rather current phenomenon, not older than a few decades. Nevertheless, it is crucial for Europe to understand the current dynamics within and between religious minority groups and mainstream society and also Europe's changing position vis-à-vis the Middle East. In the fourth part, on "European Islam", we find two contributions that focus on the specific situation of Muslim minorities in a non-Muslim environment. The first one relates to established knowledge on this issue, while the last looks for more contemporary methodologies in dealing with religious texts. In "A prelude Fiqh Al-Aqaliyyât: Rashîd Ridâ's Fatwâs for Muslims under non-Muslim Rule (first half 20th century)" Umar Ryad deals with several *fatwas* issued by the Syro-Egyptian Sheikh Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ (1865-1935) for Muslims living under non-Muslim rule in the first half of the 20th century. The Islamic world of Ridâ's time witnessed the era of colonialism, and when Ridâ issued his *fatwas*, he also considered Muslims under the colonial statute as living under a non-Muslim rule. Studying these *fatwas* can best serve as a model for understanding how Muslim religious scholars try to adapt Muslim normative sources to give answers to their fellow Muslims living in a non-Muslim domain.

In the final article "Markers for reading the Koran", Rachid Benzine states that Muslim thought cannot develop without appropriating the Quran anew, starting from the interpretation of the text without predisposed theological assumptions of transcendence. The text is the mediator of an original message; it is a trace of prophetic communication. It gives us indirect access to the original spoken words. But how can the infinite be transmitted by the finite? The text is in need of a receiver and

to interpret it in the framework of our current epistemological situation all sciences at our disposition should be used, following the example of the earliest Arab grammarians. A critical hermeneutical reading takes into account the difference between the historical context of the production of the text and the contemporary context of reception (we should render to the past the uncertainty of the future). A text can also be approached from an ontological, poetical or ethical angle. The danger is in keeping to a one-dimensional reading, which would lead to excessive rationalism in the case of hermeneutical analysis, risks to close in on itself in the case of an ontological reading, becomes unrealistic in the case of poetic interpretation and can lead to fundamentalism in the ethical reading. To understand the depth of the text as the trace of the original word, and avoid these traps, a combination of all four approaches is required.

The case studies presented in this book show how religious minorities form a challenge to the surrounding majority society through the practice of confrontation and dialogue and how they are themselves shaped by this confrontation. Nevertheless, their situation is often precarious and integration/participation in mainstream society is not always obvious. All these factors are at play in the repositioning of minorities. But also the concept of religious minority itself is changing. It gives way to modification of institutions and structures on the juridical, political and organisational level. Political, socio-economic and cultural changes also influence the position and interaction of religious minorities on the micro level. This is reflected in the emergence of new community networks and new forms of interaction between different groups in society. A special characteristic of contemporary interaction is the importance of the virtual level. The internet provides minority communities with an important instrument to entertain not only local but also transnational communications which impact on the identity constructions and positioning of religious minority groups.

Both Europe and the Middle East are undergoing significant changes that have an impact on their religious landscape and affect the positioning of their respective religious minority groups. From the perspective of the majority it is challenging to look at the mirror experiences of Muslim minorities in Europe and Christian minorities in the Middle East. It gives us an opportunity to look over the wall and learn from the other side. In both regions, tensions between nation-state belonging and global community building, between recognition of pluralism and solidarity with the Diaspora influence cultural and religious identity formation and representation of minorities, which transforms our societies.