PART III

Christians and Muslims in society
This chapter focuses on Muslims in Europe and North America in both historical and contemporary times. It discusses various aspects of Muslim-minority communities and includes examples of Muslim travellers to western countries. The primary aim is to examine in what ways Muslim perceptions of the West have been coloured by the experience of actually witnessing life in places with an ethos that either reflects or stems from Christian teachings.

Some problems in delimiting the scope of our interest

When discussing Muslims in Christian lands, it is necessary to stress that it is not that easy to reach an exact definition of what to include in the phrase ‘Christian lands’. While my first example is taken from the medieval Iberian Peninsula and the cultures of the mudejars and moriscos of al-Andalus, it is clear that people of a Muslim cultural background have been in contact with Christians for a long time. For example, some of the first converts to Islam during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad emigrated to Abyssinia in order to avoid the oppression of the non-Muslim population in Mecca, and it was Christians who ruled some of the areas that were initially conquered by Muslims after the death of the Prophet. Consequently, the development of an urban and bureaucratic Muslim culture was clearly situated in a context that had its base in the periods of Hellenistic and Late Antiquity, which included Christian, Jewish and Persian traditions (on these aspects, see e.g. Thomas 2008).

The boundary between so-called Christian and non-Christian lands also becomes blurred if we turn to later periods and consider, for example, the fact that a large percentage of those Africans who ended up as slaves in both South and North America from the sixteenth century onwards were the bearers of Muslim cultural traditions. However, this group of Muslims soon became acculturated and Christianized, because of which they have left few traces. Despite critical problems with sources, this is an early example of Muslims living under Christian rule (Curtis 2009).

Another example is the colonial period. From the end of the eighteenth century until the First and Second World Wars, large parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia were under colonial rule which was also Christian in name, making the colonial period an important reminder of how difficult it is to define the West. Should we limit our definition of the West to Europe and North America, or should we also include, for example, cultural, economic and technological influences that were transmitted to the rest of the world?
Given the many problems in defining and delimiting the scope of this chapter, my examples are primarily taken from Muslims in European and North American history. Although many attempts have been made to write up a history of Europe as a continent without Muslims, such descriptions are clearly based on a very selective history. Such narratives of exclusion (as I have called them elsewhere; see Larsson and Spielhaus 2013) currently exert a strong influence on political and popular debates about Islam and Muslims in Europe today. Nonetheless, since it is in fact clear that people of a Muslim cultural background have been part of the European continent since the earliest centuries of Islam, it is more accurate to talk about narratives of inclusion. In addition to the better known examples from the Mediterranean region (that is, Sicily, the Iberian Peninsula and the Ottoman Empire, including former Yugoslavia and large parts of Central Europe), it is also necessary to stress that Muslims of Tatar descent have lived and thrived in many parts of eastern Europe. For example, from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Muslim Tatars played an important part in the Polish-Lithuanian Grand Duchy, which covered an area stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. In this empire, the Muslim Tatars were given freedom of religion, and they were included as traders and soldiers in the administration (Larsson and Racius 2010). Leaving these problems aside, it is time to turn to some examples of Muslims living in what we today commonly understand as Europe and North America.

Muslims as minorities in Europe: historical examples

The status of Muslims as minorities is not a new question for Muslim theologians. How to view and advise Muslims living outside ‘the abode of peace’ (dār al-Islām) has been debated from at least the eighth century. As Khaled Abou el Fadl points out (1994), it is clear that Muslim theologians have different attitudes to this subject, and besides their various conclusions, they also struggle with how to define the boundaries of the dār al-Islām and ‘the abode of war’ (dār al-ḥarb), also known as ‘the abode of unbelief’ (dār al-kufr). Several normative Islamic sources point to the fact that Muslims who live in a non-Islamic society should perform a hījra and leave the so-called corrupted land. This notion is, for example, expressed in Q 4:100, which reads:

And he who forsakes the domain of evil for the sake of God shall find on earth many a lonely road, as well as life abundant. And if anyone leaves his home, fleeing from evil unto God and His Apostle, and then death overtakes him – his reward is ready with God: for God is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.

(Asad 1980)

Without going into any detail, this verse has been interpreted as saying that Muslims cannot live under non-Muslim rule, as well as being used to demonstrate that the boundary between the non-Muslim and Muslim lands is not that clear. Corruption, oppression and sinful behaviour could, for example, also take place in regions dominated by Muslims, and in order to avoid such places believers are advised to migrate (i.e. to perform a hījra). This indicates that these boundaries are fluid and open to interpretation.

Moving on from the theoretical discussion here, it is clear that the question of Muslims living as minorities under Christian rule became more relevant from the eleventh century onwards. For example, in both Sicily and certain parts of the Iberian Peninsula, Muslim rule was lost and replaced by Christian rule (on Muslims under Christian rule in Sicily, see Metcalfe 2002; on Muslims under Christian rule on the Iberian Peninsula, see, for example, Miller 2008, Harvey 1994). While some Muslims left these lands after the Christians had conquered them, others stayed on and accepted their new status as a Muslim minority. These Muslims became
important interpreters and cultural brokers between Muslims and Christians, in the Iberian Peninsula becoming known as mudejars (in Arabic mudajjānūn or ahl al-dajn, ‘people of protected tributary status’ – the sense of the term can be understood from the meaning of the cognate dājin, ‘domesticated’; Harvey 1994: 178). The vast majority of Muslim jurists, among them the North African Mālikī scholar Abū l-`Abbās Ahmad ibn Yāḥyā al-Wanshārī (d. 1508), stressed that this minority situation was unacceptable, and in two fatwās (nonbinding legal recommendations) he emphasised that the mudejars had to leave the Iberian Peninsula, otherwise they ran the risk of losing their faith (El Fadl 1994: 154–6; Harvey 1994: 179). However, it is also possible to find other voices arguing differently. For example, in a fatwā dating from 1504, the Mālikī jurist ʿUbaydallāh al-Maghrāwī al-Wahrānī stresses that the mudejars in Granada could remain under Christian rule even after the fall of Granada in 1492. If they had problems in practising Islam publicly, he said, they could conduct their Islamic rituals in secret (i.e. apply the principle of taqiyya) (El Fadl 1994: 156–7). This demonstrates that some Muslim theologians were concerned not with geographical space but with the ability to practise their faith: as long as Muslims could do this, they were actually living in dār al-Islām. But the records indicate that those Muslims who remained in Christian lands faced increasingly harsh policies, as well as growing pressure to convert to Christianity. For example, to speak Arabic, to keep Arabic records or to possess books in Arabic was punishable in many parts of the Iberian Peninsula after the fall of Granada (see al-Ḥajārī 1997: 72–4). But in the early period of the mudejar culture, as in Valencia after the Christian conquest in the thirteenth century, there was hardly any pressure to abandon Islam, and Muslims actually thrived in the absence of a Muslim ruler in these parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Harvey 1994: 182–3). It was even argued by some Muslim theologians that this minority status was a new form of jihād (‘struggle’) because it encouraged the Muslim minority to remain in a Christian land. For example, in this situation it was an obligation for mudejar to help Muslim slaves and prisoners who had been captured during the Reconquista and to liberate them if they could (Miller 2008).

After the fall of the Kingdom of Granada in 1492 the Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, though the Muslims were not. However, with time the situation became unbearable for those Muslims who had remained, and most (if not all) converted to Catholicism. Under the new statute they became known as Moriscos (‘Moors’ who had been baptised as Christians, not infrequently by coercion). It is likely that some of these converts to Christianity remained Muslims at heart who may have continued to practise Islam in secret (cf. al-Ḥajārī 1997: 34). Hence, the wider community, and especially the Inquisition, often looked upon Moriscos as crypto-Muslims, as a result of which they were often targeted. The Moriscos remained in the Iberian Peninsula until their expulsion in 1609–14 (García-Arenal 2015).

**Muslim encounters with the West**

Although there are examples of medieval Arabic travel books that contain some information about the geography and cultures of Europe (cf. for example, Hopkins 1990), the knowledge that Muslims had about the West was in general sparse. Apart from theological texts and commercial enterprises, there was little first-hand knowledge about Europe and its civilisations in the wider Muslim world. While encounters with European traders and diplomats were quite common (Constable 1996; Goitein 1967–93), at least in the cosmopolitan cities of the larger Muslim empires and especially during the Ottoman era, it was unusual for Muslims actually to travel in Christian lands.

An early example of a travel book dealing with a Muslim writer who visited Christian lands is Ahmad ibn Qāsim al-Ḥajārī’s (d. after 1640) Kitāb nāṣir al-dīn ‘alā l-qawm al-kāfirīn (‘The support of religion against the infidel’). The book deals with al-Ḥajārī’s visits to France and the
Göran Larsson

Netherlands, one of his aims being to refute Christianity and Judaism. However, the book also contains descriptions of the countries that al-Ḥajarī visited. When he arrived in Amsterdam, for example, he wrote:

After I reached the City of Amsterdam, I marvelled at the beauty of its architecture and the style of its buildings, its cleanness and the great number of its inhabitants. Its population was almost like that of the city of Paris in France. There is no city in the world with so many ships as it has! One says that the total number of its ships, including the smaller and the bigger ones, is six thousand. As for the houses, each of these is painted and decorated with marvellous colours from top to bottom. Not one resembles another in the art of its painting. All the streets are made of paved stones.

(al-Ḥajarī 1997: 194)

In the city of Leiden, al-Ḥajarī was even able to meet scholars who had some knowledge of the Arabic language. Apart from these encounters he was not that impressed by the West, but the superior attitude towards the West that is found in this account was soon to change.

With the rise of the colonial empires from the end of the eighteenth century, it became evident that Europe and the Middle East had both acquired a new kind of interest in each other. Even though Europe had the upper hand in this process, it is important to stress that encounters with the colonial powers also had an impact on the societies of the Middle East. The most renowned Muslim traveller to Europe at this point in time was Rifāʿ a Rāfiʿ al-Tahtāwī (1801–73), who was sent to Paris in 1826 by the Egyptian ruler Muḥammad ʿAlī (1769–1849) as part of his plan to modernise Egyptian society. The aim of al-Tahtāwī’s travels was that he should function as an imām for Egyptian students who had been sent to Paris to learn languages and the ways and manners of the French. The importance of his account of his travels, Tākhīṣ al-ibrīz ilā talkhīṣ Bārīz (‘The extraction of gold in the description of Paris’), was tremendous: according to Paul Starkey, ‘al-Tahtawi’s book is almost certainly the first attempt to describe modern Western civilisation on the basis of an extended period of residence in Europe itself’ (Starkey 2001: 282). Subsequently, the book was an important inspiration for the development of modern Arabic literature (on this influence, see, for example, El-Enany 2006), but the new ideas that al-Tahtāwī encountered during his five-year stay in France also had a great impact on the transformation of the educational system of Egypt and on intellectual and cultural debates in the country. Although he was impressed with many of the things and ideas he came to learn about in France, he was not an uncritical admirer.

A later example of a Muslim intellectual who travelled to the West is found in the writings of the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qūṭb (1906–66). Between November 1948 and August 1950 he stayed in North America as a student and observer for the Ministry of Education (Wizānat al-Maʿārif). In contrast to earlier travellers to the West such as al-Tahtāwī, Qūṭb was eager to separate the East from the West. He believed that the East was superior to the West and that North America was corrupt and morally weak (Calvert 2000: 88). His travel reports from the US are important because they provided a model for other thinkers who wanted to prove a fundamental difference between the spiritual Orient and an Occident driven by materialism, corruption and individualism. Consequently, according to Qūṭb, the typical American is superficial and not interested in genuine spirituality. This dichotomy was clearly an inspiration for later Islamists (Calvert 2000), but the image of the West as something damaging is also found in the writings of advocates who adhered to so-called third worldism (Malley 1999, especially p. 361). For the purposes of this chapter, Sayyid Qūṭb provides an example of a Muslim who actually visited and stayed for a short period of time in a so-called Christian country. After his stay, he returned to
Muslims in Christian lands

Egypt with very negative memories of his experiences, because of which he was convinced that Islam is the solution and not the problem.

Muslims as minorities: contemporary examples

The decolonialization process, the end of the Second World War and the arrival of non-European guest-workers from the 1960s changed the composition of the European population, representing the present-day return of Muslims to Europe. However, as noted earlier, it is important to remember that Muslims have been part of the European fabric for a very long time and that the arrival of the guest-workers was not the first time that Muslims had set foot on European soil. Nonetheless, this was the beginning of a new phase. Although it is likely that the first migrants envisaged spending only a short period in Europe, it soon became clear that many were here to stay. From the early 1970s several European countries changed their policies, making it possible for migrants to bring their families to the West. The arrival of women and children created a new situation, and as a consequence it became necessary to establish Islamic institutions and to build mosques to care for both cultural and religious affairs.

The new institutions that were set up in the West were often coloured by the cultural backgrounds of the migrants, and most international and transnational global Muslim organisations were also established in Europe from the 1960s onwards. These organisations have often kept the migrants in a cultural relationship with their so-called home countries.

However, with the birth of later generations these ties have often been questioned, and many young people have found that these organisations do not provide constructive and viable solutions or answers regarding how to live as a Muslim in Europe. This weakness has nurtured a growing interest in Muslim-minority jurisprudence. One example is Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), the great-grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna (1906–49). He has tried to develop a form of Muslim jurisprudence and theology that situates Muslims in a European context. In a series of publications and speeches, Ramadan has stressed that there is no contradiction between being European and being a Muslim, as he emphasises in his book To be a European Muslim (Ramadan 2002):

This reform movement requires, as we have said several times, a true intellectual revolution that will make it possible to be reconciled to the universality of Islamic values and to stop considering ourselves a marginalized minority, on the brink of adapting or integrating, and trying to do no more than protect ourselves from an environment we consider dangerous. In order to achieve this, Western Muslims need to free themselves of their double inferiority complex – in relation to the West (and the domination of its rationality and technology) on the one hand and in relation to the Muslim world (which alone seems to produce the great Arabic-speaking spirits of Islam who quote the texts with such ease) on the other. We shall have to liberate ourselves from these faults by developing a rich, positive, and participatory presence in the West that must contribute from within to debates about the universality of values, globalization, ethics, and the meaning of life in modern times.

(Ramadan 2004: 224–5)

However, the Muslims of Europe must realise that the non-Muslim context in which they find themselves provides them with new possibilities and challenges but also that in order to avoid their growing stigmatisation and isolation, they must break free and be proud of their own identity. Ramadan argues that they should look upon themselves as part of Europe. Because of
his engagement, Ramadan has been criticised by both Muslims and non-Muslims. While some non-Muslims do not believe that he is calling for a new reformation of Islamic interpretations and that he is talking with a so-called forked tongue (see e.g. Fourest 2005), some Muslims accuse him of corrupting and changing the Islamic message to fit into a new situation (he has even been seen as an apostate from Islam; see Ramadan 2010: 50). His critics argue that Islam cannot be changed and that it is the environment that should be Islamised and not the other way round. Also in Europe we find Muslim groups arguing that ‘true’ Muslims should migrate to the so-called Muslim world, or else remain in isolation from Western and non-Muslim society (see, for example, Ramadan 2010: 48–9).

The European Council of Fatwa and Research aims to find religious-legal solutions that, while within the framework of shari‘a as an all-encompassing system and while encouraging the fortification of religious identity, enable Muslims in Europe to profess their religious beliefs without compromising their social and professional positions. In doing so, the Council expands the horizons for Muslim identity in the West, offering them a middle ground of sorts between ‘integration’ and ‘introversion’, but in the process also creates ethical and philosophical questions regarding identity, nationality and law (Shavit and Zahalka 2015: 366).

The work of the European Council for Fatwa and Research is collectively carried out by a large group of international theologians and jurists from the Middle East, Europe and North America, but Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926) and Taha Jabir al-‘Alwani (b. 1935) are its pioneers, and their ways of thinking about Muslim-minority jurisprudence and theology are central to the organisation. The European Council for Fatwa and Research was started in London in 1997 on the initiative of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, another Muslim umbrella organisation that has close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (Shavit and Zahalka 2015: 367; see www.fioe.org). In order for Muslims to be able to practise Islam in the West, it is necessary to come up with solutions to practical problems. However, this does not imply that the Council is arguing that Islam should be changed or altered in a new or so-called non-Islamic direction. On the contrary, it is necessary to be ‘true’ to the message and apply it as conscientiously as possible in order to suit the new situation. In other words, it is not the message that has been changed, but the context. It is also an obligation for Muslims to spread Islam and to invite non-Muslims to embrace Islam, work that according to the organisation is a form of da‘wa (‘invitation to Islam’).

The European Council for Fatwa and Research has issued a large number of fatāwā or non-binding legal recommendations, some of which have proved more controversial than others. For example, the Council has issued recommendations stressing that it is lawful and even obligatory for Muslims to vote and participate in elections (Shavit and Zahalka 2015: 371–2), that it is acceptable for Muslims to take out bank and student loans (al-Qaradawi 2003: 152–99; Shavit and Zahalka 2015: 372–4) and that women who convert to Islam can stay in a marriage with a non-Muslim husband (al-Qaradawi 2003: 79–116; Shavit and Zahalka 2015: 375–6). All of these suggestions are controversial: for example, many theologians argue that, because it is only God who lays down laws, it is wrong to participate in elections, while to take loans is to accept the principle of charging interest or usury, explicitly forbidden in Q 2:275–7. The conclusions that the European Council for Fatwa and Research has reached are therefore controversial and innovative. Its overarching aim is nonetheless to provide interpretations that make it easier for Muslims to live in societies that are not dominated by Islamic traditions and laws without having to abandon their faith and to be able to foster an Islamic identity (al-Qaradawi 2003: 5–7). From this point of view, the Council is propagating a minority jurisprudence that is clearly coloured by the fact that Muslims live in the West. From a comparative point of view, it is easy to compare the aims of this organisation with the situation that the mudejars faced after the Reconquista.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on both historical and contemporary examples which demonstrate that Muslim jurisprudential discussions have been influenced by the fact that Muslims continue to live as minorities in contexts that are predominantly characterised by non-Islamic traditions. In addition, I have also included a section on Muslim travellers to Christian lands in order to show that these encounters could have very different effects and influences on both the East and the West.

While Riḍā’ā Rāfīʿ al-Ṭahāwī was in Europe in order to learn from the West, Sayyid Quṭb’s encounter with North America was a learning experience that led to his radicalisation and conviction that the East was superior to the West and that Islam was greater than Christianity. The case of Tariq Ramadan tells a completely different story. Ramadan was born and raised in Europe, and his goal has been to establish an interpretation that makes it possible for Muslims to be a part of Europe. Although one could argue that Quṭb and Ramadan have something in common in their connection to the Muslim Brotherhood – Ramadan being the grandson of Ḥasan al-Banna and Quṭb an important ideologue – they come to completely different solutions regarding how to face the challenge of the West. Also, the European Council for Fatwa and Research encompasses Ramadan’s ambition to create an interpretation of Islam that makes it possible for Muslims to live in the West. While both argue that Islam should be based on a so-called moderate or middle of the road interpretation (in Arabic wasatiyya), it is important to stress that this organisational body includes groups that come from a number of different theological positions and camps. In all their complexity, the selected examples show that Muslims can react and respond in different ways when they live in nominally Christian countries.

As my examples and discussions demonstrate, it has become more difficult to make a clear distinction between East and West in a globalised world. However, the difficulty of separating a so-called Christian country from a so-called Muslim country is already highlighted in medieval Muslim theological discussions. As has been shown, Muslim writers could have problems in making a clear distinction between dār al-Islām and dār al-ḥarb. The historical records show that the boundaries are often open to interpretation and are seldom (if ever) clearly defined. The fact that a small but growing proportion of individuals in the West have also converted to Islam makes the distinction between Christian and Muslim lands even more problematic. These converts – one could, for example, mention Leopold Weiss, who embraced Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Asad (1900–92) – are often important cultural brokers between Western and Islamic traditions, norms and values. Besides converts, it is also evident that Muslims living in Europe and North America have made significant contributions to intellectual and theological debates about Islam and Muslim-minority affairs.

In this chapter I have primarily included references to Tariq Ramadan and the European Council for Fatwa and Research, but it would also be possible to include voices such as Amina Wadud (2006), Asma Barlas (2004) and Omid Safi (2003), all of whom are calling for justice and equality. Their thought is clearly situated in both Islamic intellectual traditions and Western academic theories, and their ideas about Islam and Muslims living in the West are rooted in notions nourished by feminism, anti-racism and human rights.

References


Asad, Muhammad, trans. (1980), The message of the Qurʾān, Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus.


al-Qaradawi, Y. (2003), Fiqh of Muslim minorities: Contentious issues and recommended solutions, Cairo: Al-Falah Foundation.

Ramadan, T. (2002), To be a European Muslim, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.


Further reading


El Fadl, K.A. (1994), Islamic law and Muslim minorities: The juristic discourse on Muslim minorities from the second/eighth to the eleventh/seventeenth centuries’, Islamic Law and Society 1, 141–87.


Ramadan, T. (2002), To be a European Muslim, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.