History and numbers today

Behind the headlines about Islam in Europe, increasing in frequency over the last couple of decades, lies a complex history and contemporary story. For the purposes of this article, Europe is the north-western part of the Eurasian continent which geographers have traditionally bounded by the Arctic Ocean in the north, the Atlantic in the west, the Mediterranean and the Black Seas in the south, and in the east by the Urals and the Caucasus. Turkey and Cyprus are not included. The Europe covered is thus larger than the European Union (without Cyprus) while smaller than the membership of the Council of Europe. This area makes for a very varied history, one which immediately serves to emphasise the complexity of the story to be told. While there has been a steady interaction between the Muslim world and Europe since the rise of Islam in the seventh century, there have been four major phases of Muslim presence, all of which leave their mark in the present:

First, from the early eighth century parts of the Iberian Peninsula were under continuous Muslim rule, ending only with the fall of Granada in 1492. For a shorter period in the ninth to eleventh centuries, Malta, Sicily and parts of southern Italy also came under Muslim rule. The resulting Muslim populations gradually left or assimilated into the Catholic kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, with the last vestiges lasting well into the sixteenth century, leaving behind a rich cultural, institutional and intellectual heritage which continued to mark Europe down to the present.

Second, a series of Mongol expansions into eastern Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries left behind Mongol realms whose rulers had become Muslims. Their successor states were the Tatar khanates of the Crimea and the Volga river basin, and Muslim Tatar populations and culture survived the Russian conquests which were completed with the capture of the city of Kazan in 1552. At least a century before this the Grand Duchy of Lithuania-Poland had recruited significant numbers of Tatars into its army, and their descendants still live in today’s Finland, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine.

Third, in south-eastern Europe the Ottoman state expanded out of Anatolia, conquering Constantinople in 1453. Muslim communities grew up through migration and conversion across the region over subsequent centuries. While many left as the Ottomans
retracted before Habsburg and Russian expansion and, later, the appearance of new nation states in the region, many remained, and their descendants are still there today.

Fourth, from the mid-nineteenth century Muslims from European colonies in Africa and Asia started to move to the imperial metropolises, a movement which grew exponentially after 1945. The large Muslim communities of western Europe have arisen out of the arrival of economic migrants, refugees and family reunion from all parts of the Muslim world of the last 50 years.

This history immediately points to two major and different components of the European Muslim scene. Concerning the first, on the one hand are those, particularly in eastern and south-eastern Europe, who have been an integral part of European societies for generations and centuries. While they have participated in the social and economic life of their countries, they have also on occasion played collective political roles mostly as ethnic, but occasionally also as religious, groups in periods of conflict, most notably in the collapse of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s. On the other hand are those who have arrived more recently, mostly into western parts of Europe, whose story has been one of the struggle of settling and finding a place and a role in established nation states, which have not always found it easy to acknowledge them as fellow citizens. Since the collapse of the Soviet system and the end of the Cold War in 1989–91, Muslim immigrants have also been arriving in increasing numbers in the countries of central and eastern Europe (for eastern Europe, see Górak-Sosnowska 2011; for western Europe see Nielsen and Otterbeck 2016).

The second component relates to the previous question, namely how far can one assume religious belonging from an ethno-national starting point. Research in a variety of countries, mostly in those parts of Europe where Muslim populations have arisen out of twentieth-century immigration, indicates that the degree of active identification with Islam among people from Muslim cultures is less than half, and sometimes significantly less than half, of the population in question. Recent Danish research shows, for example, that there are about 222,000 ‘Muslims’ in the country. This has been calculated on the basis of ethno-national data referring mainly to original citizenship and statistics on acquisition of Danish citizenship, assuming that almost all Turks (which includes Kurds with Turkish nationality) are Muslim. Similar calculations are made for groups originating from other parts of the Muslim world. Simultaneously, other research indicates that substantially less than half of that population engage in any kind of activity normally associated with being Muslim, e.g. performing prayers with any degree of regularity, celebrating the major festivals, fasting during Ramadan. The degree of religious identification also varies enormously in different parts of Europe. It is probably justified to suggest that the Muslim populations originating out of recent immigration, mostly in the west, are relatively more ‘religious’ than are the much older and established communities of, for example, south-eastern Europe. The Bosniaks of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Albanians of Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, not to mention the Turks, Pomsaks and Muslim Roma of Bulgaria, are generally much more secularised. Just because one’s name is Muhammad or Aysha, it does not mean that one is Muslim in anything but name.

A statistical survey may suggest a total of somewhere around 30 million Muslims in Europe (not counting Russia beyond the Urals), but this only gives a very vague indication of the maximum number of people who come out of a Muslim ethno-cultural background. To what extent they represent a social, cultural, economic or political potential in the public life of the broader local, national or transnational environment will always depend on circumstances (Nielsen et al. 2009 and later; this series is a significant source for many of the country accounts that follow).
Significant characteristics

In the following, the Muslim communities of Europe will be discussed from a number of different sets of such circumstances. They fall generally into two categories, namely those located primarily within the communities and those located in the larger environment. As regards the former, the circumstances are ethnic and national, socio-economic, and religious (‘confessional’ tendencies and institutions). The external factors have to do with relations with the state, transnational networks and the impact of public perceptions and debates.

Internal aspects

In this section Muslim communities in Europe will be described in terms of their own characteristics: ethno-national, socio-economic and religious.

The ethno-national character of the European Muslim communities of recent immigrant origin can be broadly classified as South Asian, North African and Turkish. This is connected to the period of European empires overseas. The first small number of immigrants in modern times came to Britain from various parts of the empire in the nineteenth century (especially Yemen), but the much larger post-1945 immigration came from the colonies in the Caribbean (mostly Christians) and the Indian subcontinent (Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims). French Muslim immigration started in the late nineteenth century from Algeria, a process which took off after 1945 and expanded to include Tunisia and Morocco and, later, parts of former French sub-Saharan Africa. When Germany began to import labour for its growing postwar industries, Turkey in due course became the largest supplier from outside Europe (arguably there had developed a pseudo-colonial economic relationship between Germany and Turkey at the end of the nineteenth century). These patterns set the tone also for the smaller European countries as they imported migrant workers, with Belgium and the Netherlands as the clearest examples, receiving Muslims who originated mainly in Morocco and Turkey. Turks also came to France in substantial numbers. In Scandinavia, the mix was more diverse, but in varying patterns also combined South Asians, North Africans and Turks. It should be noted that these very rough regional and national definitions cover a range of ethnic and linguistic groups. North Africans include both Arabs and Berbers, South Asians include Bengalis and Sylhetis, Punjabis, Pashtuns and Sindis, and Gujaratis, not to mention a number of other smaller groups. Turks include Kurds (and in government statistics also Christians, especially Syrian Orthodox). Smaller numbers of immigrants from Indonesia and Suriname (former Dutch Guyana) also moved to the Netherlands.

Under communist regimes in eastern Europe before 1990, the most common form of Muslim migrant presence was that of students from favoured countries, which included parts of the Arab world. Small numbers, usually men, stayed and settled, sometimes with difficulty, when they met and married local women. From the early 1990s these regions also began to take part in the broader European immigration process, leading to the growth of especially Arab and Pakistani communities.

The indigenous Muslim communities of eastern Europe also began to acquire greater mobility after the end of the Cold War. Ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, having returned in large numbers from exile in Turkey following forcible assimilation policies in the mid-1980s, now started looking west as well as back to Turkey during the economic hardships of the 1990s. At the same time ethnic Albanians sought to escape the insecurities of the political and military disintegration of Yugoslavia and the economic collapse of Albania. Further north, long-term migration of craftsmen and traders within pre-1917 Russia had left Tatar communities in Finland, Poland and Ukraine as well as the Baltic states.
Across Europe as a whole the general picture is one of communities of Muslim cultural backgrounds who are concentrated towards the bottom of the social range. In the eastern regions this is due to their traditional concentration in small towns and villages either as agriculturalists or as travelling craftsmen. In the western parts it is mainly because the immigration from Muslim parts of the world came from similar backgrounds into unskilled or semi-skilled occupations in those traditional industries which have been under marked downward pressure since the 1980s — textiles, metals and the like. Across the European subcontinent there has also been a tendency for Muslim communities, usually constituting some form of ethnic minority within national states, to be politically and culturally marginalised. Access to social and economic advancement has therefore been difficult.

Among the younger generations, in western Europe the children and increasingly the grandchildren of the original immigrants, this situation is changing. Growing numbers of young people are going through higher education and finding appropriate employment afterwards. A general pattern seems to be for a small proportion of young people to experience educational and career success, in some countries a larger proportion than in the general population, while the large majority continues to fail at school and live on the margins. They can experience unemployment levels two or three times greater than the general population. Such conditions often underlie social disturbances such as those in Britain in 2005 and in France a couple of years later. What in many countries is missing among the ethnic minorities is the large middle range of clerical and skilled workers which characterise the majority. It is worth noting that the pattern of growing educational success among young women generally applies even more strongly, if anything, among ethnic minorities, Muslim or otherwise.

At the core of this process is a search for what it means to be Muslim in a secular and post-Christian European environment. Various methods are mobilised to distinguish between contingent cultural traditions and necessary core Islamic values and practices. Especially in communities of immigrant origin this can often put the young into conflict with their parents, for whom their traditional ways of life remain valuable, and with the older generation of religious leaders, who find it difficult to provide an authoritative model in the face of experiences with which they are unfamiliar. The result of such searching is to an extent experimental and leads to a wide range of different solutions, such that it is difficult to conclude that we see the development of a European Islam, unless that is thought of as covering a wide range of phenomena. Among these, the range of responses which is subsumed in the label Salafi is particularly attractive to young families who feel threatened by the apparent lack of public standards of behaviour, including sexual mores and loose family values (for various aspects of these developments see Dupret et al. 2012; Janmohamed 2016; Pauly 2004).

**External aspects**

The way Islam and Muslims have developed their institutional and ‘theological’ priorities and structures in Europe has been strongly impacted by the wider environment. This section will focus briefly on the influence of the host state, transnational networks and public perceptions and debates.

In some of the formerly communist countries there was a formal relationship of recognition designed by the state to maintain control over religion. Their continuation after the communist collapse has not always been easy. The relationship to the state has had to be renegotiated in processes which have been highly political, both with reference to domestic politics and with reference to pressures and expectations coming from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, with its European Convention on Human Rights.
principles and mechanisms. In some countries some form of official status has been established in new forms, while in others the relationship has been fully severed. At the same time, the open political and institutional frameworks established allowed alternative Muslim bodies to establish themselves. The result has been some sharp and long-lasting rivalries in countries like Bulgaria and Serbia, while in others several parallel national Muslim bodies now exist. This situation has not been made easier by the arrival and settlement of new groups of immigrant Muslims, who often find little use for the old established native bodies.

In western Europe, where there has not been the disconnect associated with the communist collapse, developments have been more gradual. But across the board, Muslims have had to develop forms of organisation which could work within the structures of the host country. In some countries there is a system of formal recognition of religious bodies, ‘churches’, often coupled with financial and/or institutional privileges. Thus, recognition in Belgium (1974) and Austria (1979) has given access to public funding for Islamic religious education for children, although the implementation in Belgium has repeatedly failed due to the inability of various parts of the Muslim communities to work together. Recognition in Spain (1992) gave access to civil recognition of certain religiously conducted marriages and later to public financial support. In Sweden and Norway, Muslim organisations can benefit from ‘church tax’ arrangements if they meet certain criteria to do with size and associational structure. Although strictly a secular state following legislation in 1905, the French state has a mechanism by which it can negotiate with the religious communities about issues of common concern, and the Conseil français du culte musulman was founded in 2002 for this purpose. The United Kingdom is one country which has no common formal structures into which religious bodies can be inserted. Each of the main traditional churches has its own unique status and legal conditions. Others, including the immigrated religions (which include particularly Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam, as well as newer Christian movements such as the Pentecostalists), can make use of the various laws regarding associations. Muslim organisations therefore tend to combine the status of ‘company’, to be able to finance activities and own property, and ‘charities’ to benefit from certain tax advantages (Fetzer and Soper 2005; Laurence 2012; Nielsen 2013).

As members of a global religious tradition as well as of transnational networks of shared belief and socio-cultural identity, Muslims in Europe also have transnational horizons. The consequences of adherence to such networks can be an expectation that the local groups in some way participate in the implementation of common activities or objectives (Pew Forum 2010). Possibly the most successful of such networks is the Tablighi Jamaat, a movement originating in early twentieth-century India but now with a large following in all parts of the Muslim world, characterised especially by the expectation that its adult male members take on lengthy periods of itinerant preaching. Other such groups are more closely associated with a single nationality, such as the Turkish network established and led by Fethullah Gülen, or the smaller but very active network of organisations originating in Pakistan related to the Jamaat-i-Islami, established in the late 1940s by Abu l-A’la Mawdudi (d. 1979). The Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi and Iranian initiatives have already been mentioned, but one should certainly add also various Sufi groups, though they differ in character so substantially that each has to be studied more closely in its own right.

Common to the active membership of all such groups is that at the same time as they act as members of the group they also act with reference to the local circumstances. On the one hand this can entail adapting the activities and objectives of the network to achieve positive results locally. In Britain Jamaat-i-Islami groups have been particularly successful in this. But it can also place the local group in tension with the local environment, especially when the network has a centralised and authoritative management structure. This was for a long time a problem for
several of the Turkish networks in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France. During the 1970s and 1980s the official body Diyanet with its headquarters in Ankara appeared to be more concerned with imposing its authority than with serving the interests of the local communities, especially after the military coup of September 1980. However, since the 1990s this policy seems to have changed, and the central management is more responsive to local needs and priorities. Something similar could be said about more recent developments among the Milli Görüş, an independent movement of a somewhat traditional character which to an extent overlaps with the AK Party, in government since November 2002. Research likewise indicates that groups which have come out of a Muslim Brotherhood background, such as the Union des Organisations Islamiques en France (UOIF), have changed character substantially (Maréchal 2008); this is also the case with the Jamaat-i-Islami-related groups referred to earlier. Overall, it is not possible to suggest a generally applicable pattern to describe the degree to which Muslim movements and associations locally act under orders or independently from any international networks to which they may relate.

The constant media attention, occasionally reinforced by polemical statements from certain Muslim sources as well as the continuing instability of political processes in parts of the Muslim world, contributes to channelling the focuses of public policy and community relations in the direction of more rather than less tension. It can take away from Muslims themselves some of the ability to determine their own priorities in their own context. In some instances this can encourage a move towards militancy among young people (Abbas 2011; Nesser 2015). In those who would prefer just to get on with their lives, it can force them to adopt actions or lifestyles which they otherwise would have preferred to avoid. It certainly obliges most people of some form of Muslim cultural heritage to take a position on issues. At the level of national politics, controversy can easily attach to a political activist who happens to be Muslim, while the high profile leaders of Muslim organisations can be exposed to exceptional public harassment. This is, however, counterbalanced by a growing experience of practical cooperation at the level of local governments, especially education authorities, and dialogue structures with local and national churches which now exist in almost all countries of Europe.

**Christian responses**

It was not long after immigrants from Muslim countries began to settle in noticeable numbers that Europeans began to respond. Initially, the religion of the immigrants was absent from public view, but that started to change when family reunion began to replace labour migration after the restrictions on fresh immigration of the early 1970s (early to mid-’60s in the UK). The earliest Christian initiatives seeking to engage with Muslims tended to be local and driven by committed individuals, both lay members of church congregations and clergy; then from the mid-1970s a number of church bodies started to explore the field at the national level. In Britain, the British Council of Churches decided that its members needed help to understand and react to the World of Islam Festival, a major national cultural programme which took place in 1976. This soon broadened its remit to become the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths. In mainland Europe the focus of interreligious relations remained Islam, since Muslims made up the overwhelming majority of the labour migration. The bishops’ conferences of the Roman Catholic church in countries such as West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France appointed individuals or small working groups to take on the task of establishing communications with Muslims and of informing the church about related issues. Usually, it was priests of the order of the Missionaries of Africa (the White Fathers), with its century and more
of missionary experience in Africa, which was asked to take on this new task. In parallel, the Protestant Federation in West Germany and the Reformed Church of the Netherlands set up their own task groups.

Separately, a small network of mostly Catholic theologians, particularly in France and Spain, established small research groups which occasionally also held larger symposia to discuss theological issues. In this they were branching out from a larger Catholic network which had its roots in interreligious activities in places such as India and Lebanon and which had taken to holding regular global meetings under the title ‘Journées romaines. In 1978 a group of participants at that meeting, which included several Protestants, decided that a similar European network would be beneficial. The Bishop of Arras, in north-eastern France, offered to host such a meeting, and the first meeting of the Journées d’Arras duly was held the following year and has met annually since. This initiative took place almost at the same time as a first European-wide meeting of churches in Salzburg. Although it was the migration and settlement of Muslims into western Europe which had motivated these developments, they included representatives from the Orthodox Church and other churches of eastern Europe: Journées d’Arras had regular participation from Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania, and when the Conference of European Churches (CEC) followed up the meeting in Salzburg by establishing an Islam committee, it included members from Russia and Romania. This CEC committee was later merged into a committee run jointly with the Council of European (Catholic) Bishops’ Conferences (CCEE).

During the first decade or more of these Europe-level meetings the two different streams, the informal Journées d’Arras and the formal joint CEC/CCEE committee, had a significant number of shared members. This meant that ideas could be freely explored in the former and then occasionally be fed into the activities of the latter. The most notable example was discussions about the place of Islam in the training of clergy, a subject which the CEC/CCEE adopted for discussion at a full conference in Birmingham in 1991.

During this time, the engagement of some churches with Muslims and in matters affecting them and their relations with Christians continued to expand. By the end of the 1980s all the Protestant churches of West Germany, the Landeskirchen, had a full-time employee dealing with policy, training and political relations. The Federation of German Protestant Churches (EKD) coordinated activities at the national level and provided advice and training support. In Britain by this time each of the main churches had their own officer providing support for local meetings and dialogue efforts, while also coordinating with other churches through the British Council of Church’s Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths and its various subgroups on e.g. education, theology, legal questions and social affairs. Gradually, each diocese of the Church of England appointed officers on interfaith relations, and clergy training in theological colleges was integrating teaching about Islam and the other major faiths, as well as visits to places of worship and meetings with community leaders. Similar activities were taking place on a growing scale in France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. In other countries where Muslim immigration had taken place later, churches were learning from the ‘pioneers’, and some began to send people to the Journées d’Arras and other meetings as a form of training.

In the late 1980s in Britain the various experiences of local and national interreligious cooperation led to the founding in 1987 of the Interfaith Network of the UK, which came to play a significant role in keeping open the conversation among the different faith communities during the Rushdie Affair (when Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic Verses incensed Muslims with its portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad) and subsequent events. At this time in Scandinavia a number of different initiatives had been taken by church-related social welfare agencies, including the establishment of drop-in centres, women’s centres and youth centres. This illustrated the difficulties that the Nordic Lutheran churches encountered for institutional reasons: they were so
closely tied to the state that it was usually simpler to let Christian voluntary organisations undertake projects which otherwise often required political decisions. In France, the strict separation of church and state also meant that a number of projects relating to North African and Turkish immigrants and, increasingly, to Muslims were taken on by Christian voluntary associations, whose Christian identities were kept largely undisclosed.

The period from the late 1980s into the following decade witnessed significant changes, some triggered by the end of the Cold War. The year 1989 was the year of the ‘affairs’. In Britain, Muslim protests against the publication of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (Lewis 1994) was followed a few months later by the first ‘head scarves’ affair in France, when three teenage girls were excluded from a school in a north Paris suburb for wearing head scarves. These events attracted public attention to the Muslim dimension of communities which hitherto had been thought of as ‘migrants’, ‘immigrants’ or ‘ethnic minorities’. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the consequent war in Bosnia (1992–5), running simultaneously with the civil war in Algeria that followed the military government’s cancellation of elections which the Islamic Salvation Front was set to win, further raised public concern about Islam. But these events also served to mobilise young European Muslims in favour of Muslim political causes. The end of the Cold War had also led to a search in some quarters for a ‘new enemy’, a move which quite quickly settled on Islam. This was most significantly mobilised in public debate by Samuel Huntington’s idea of the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ (the notion that the various civilizational blocs into which he saw the world dividing would inevitably compete with one another and come into collision), first voiced in an article with that title in the US magazine *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 (Huntington 1993). By the mid-’90s European governments were beginning to talk about encouraging dialogue with Islam, most notably in the Barcelona Accord of November 1995 between the states of the European Union and the Mediterranean littoral states. Some Muslim states had by this time started engaging in a dialogue with Christian organisations, most notably Iran, whose international cultural agency had started parallel series of conferences which met every year or two. These included partnerships with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the Greek Orthodox Church through its diocese in Geneva, the Federation of German Protestant Churches (EKD) and the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham.

During the 1990s a perception of security threats originating from sources presenting themselves as Islamic began to grow. This came to a head with the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (9/11), reinforced by subsequent terrorist attacks in Madrid in March 2005 and in London in July 2007. The Danish crisis in 2005–6 over the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (Klausen 2009), followed by a string of similar incidents through to 2015, including the persistent anti-Muslim propaganda of the Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders and the series of terrorist attacks in France and Belgium in 2015 and 2016, steadily increased public tensions and fears of Islam. Together with a string of headline-grabbing events in the Muslim world, these developments served to set a pressurised context for Christian–Muslim interaction in Europe.

In many countries of eastern Europe activities remained on a purely formal level. Governments sponsored the establishment of national interreligious bodies in countries such as Albania, Ukraine and Belarus, although these occasionally fell victim to political rivalries, as was the case in Ukraine in 2013. Similar initiatives have been more successful in Poland and Slovenia. Elsewhere, existing activities both nationally and locally were usually strengthened but were often countered by anti-Islamic movements in wider society which often found a following, sometimes organised ones, within the churches: they could not avoid the impact of wider social and political movements. Nationally, particular histories tended often to impose their own perspectives on interreligious relations. In the Greek context it remains difficult to talk...
of Christian–Muslim dialogue without the historical complications of Greek-Turkish relations imposing their own very particular priorities. Similar perspectives have tended to colour relations in other former Ottoman territories, although usually less strongly. In Italy it has been difficult to develop Catholic initiatives independently of the Vatican. In Spain, on the other hand, the Islamic period focused on Andalusia from the eighth to the fifteenth century has offered resources, often mythological, for both dialogue and conflict. Recent developments in the Arab world, especially in Syria, Iraq and Egypt, have contributed to focusing both governments and churches on persecuted Christians.

Over the years these experiences and structures of Christian–Muslim relations have had different focuses. Most public attention has been attracted by relations expressed in social and political forms in which churches and Christian groups and associations have entered into some kind of formal relationship with Muslims counterparts. These have enabled them to lobby and campaign on issues of common interest, both in relation to government policy development, especially where social and educational policy have been involved, and in terms of influencing public opinion, especially in response to perceived security threats. Furthermore, Muslims and Christians have often been drawn together by common interest in theological issues. At its most basic this has found expression in small local meetings between mosque and church discussing their respective thinking about revelation, prophecy, reading scripture, social justice and the like. At the opposite end of the spectrum this has meant meetings of national and international community leaders or academic theologians. Third, and by its nature the most difficult to document, has been the meetings of small groups and individuals moved by shared spiritual curiosity. The balance between each of these focuses has changed from time to time according to local and national priorities. But all the evidence suggests that, at a time when national and international political developments have put pressure on Christian–Muslim relations, they have developed sufficient resilience through the decades of constructive experience not only to survive such conflictual pressures but to find ways in which to develop mutual support locally and nationally.

Note

1 This section is based mostly on personal experience.

References


**Further reading**