Religious otherness

Defining boundaries of contemporary racism

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Religion, race or ancestors provide alternative elements to national identities and to nationalisms. They constitute, in different contexts, in different times and in different ways elements of inclusion and exclusion. When Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon asked in an article published in 1999, “Why Islam is like Spanish”, they referred to two ways of designing otherness on both sides of the Atlantic: religion in Europe, language in the United States. The authors justify these two otherness with “the passions awakened by the Rushdie affair in the United Kingdom and the headscarf affair in France denote a simmering confrontation between ‘Christian’ Europe and ‘intruding’ Islam”. In the United states, they argue that the referendum on bilingual education in California points to an equally dramatic tension between “Anglo America” and the “invading” Spanish language (Zolberg & Woon, 1999). Although religion, conceptualized as civil religion, in the United States succeeded in eliminating political conflicts in the public space and avoided religious discrimination, in Europe “it is viewed as problematic area” (Foner & Alba, 2008). The visibility of religion in public space of post-colonial migrants in Europe, Muslims comprising a large majority, have created a tension between the established and non-questioned principle of secularism, and the management of diversity in Europe.

Many studies and analyses have underlined the unprecedented character of Muslim migration to Europe in comparison with other waves of migration. Muslims who are citizens in the west today have been outside the history of the relationship between church and state that shaped western national character. Their settlement as a new minority goes along with the expression of an ethno-religious collective identification and claims, which blurs the accepted boundaries between private and public and creates differentiations among cultures, source of social and racial inequality. On a national level these boundaries find an institutional echo with the representation of the Other in terms of religious identities, along with a narrative that reflects the difficulties to legitimize its inscription as Otherness into a political and juridical account along with the principles of secularism.

Religion as opposed to secular power is not only a phenomenon that appears in a minority situation. The renewal of the sacred in general and its public expression as belonging (Davie, 2007) has become one of the characteristics of globalization. “Public religion” as empirical evidence according to Casanova is at the core of the “theory of differentiation” of the religious and
secular sphere (Casanova, 1994). In the case of Muslims in Europe, the demand for public recognition and representation of Islam within national institutions and societies tests the principle of secularism in the context of diversity and pluralism expressed in terms of religion. If Islam in the United States constitutes one element of ethnic pluralism in European nation-states it figures instead as a “minority religion” (Kastoryano, 2004).

In countries where Islam is the religion of the majority of the population, states’ discourses and strategies target both economic growth and nationalism with an emphasis on an “ethno-national-religious-pride” in opposition to secularism of the west. Moreover, the emergence of Islam as a transnational political force, as a global religion, redefines new boundaries of Otherness on a global level leading to tensions and rejection on a national level in European countries as well as in home countries. Both fight against “globalized Islam” (Roy, 2014); home countries praise “diaspora politics” linking religion and nationalism abroad and European countries aim at nationalizing minority religions as a part of inclusive diversity.

Ethnicization of religion

They are a variety of established secularism in different European countries (Kuru, 2004). However almost all European countries are facing same controversies based on the visibility of Islam (Göle, 2015): the headscarf and its variations (burka ban), construction of mosques, the height of the minaret and the degree of their visibility, religious instruction and more specifically the instruction of Islam in public school, instruction of imams, slaughtering, gender equality, or political values, liberalism, secularism or human rights, all questioning the “compatibility” of Islam with the secular West. Such questions generate urban violence, political violence, and linguistic violence. They all lead to feelings of fear, mistrust, and rejection that characterize the relationships between European societies and polities and their Muslim populations. It is in these terms that the presence of Muslims in Europe has settled at the heart of national debates as a major political issue and a challenge with respect to questions of equality (social and cultural), recognition (institutional and cultural) and secularism, making of religion considered as “contested category with the Enlightenment” a dominant narrative in politics (Manelli & Wilson, 2017).

Since the 1980s much research has focused on state policies concerning the governance of increasing religious pluralism (Koenig, 2007; Kastoryano, 2002, 2004; Minkenberg, 2007; Soper & Fetzer, 2007). Curiously, notes Miriam Schader, migrant and minority religions other than Islam have received far less scholarly attention, especially when it comes to analyzing the relationship between the religious and the political (Schader, 2017). A statement that José Casanova interprets as

“Immigration and Islam are almost synonymous. The overwhelming majority of immigrants in most of the European countries are Muslim and the overwhelming majority of Western European Muslims are immigrants. This entails a superimposition of different dimensions of Otherness that exacerbates the issue of boundaries, accommodation and incorporation. The immigrant, the religion, the racial and the socio-economic disprivileged ‘other’ all tend to coincide”.

Indeed Islam challenges the principle of secularism as basis for equality and neutrality that rejects the domination of one religion of the national majority over other religions in a de facto minority situation. Since 9/11, religion as Otherness around Islam has been focused on the question on security creating amalgamation between migration, Islam and terrorism.
The boundaries of Otherness have thus shifted from a cultural or racial category to a religious one in studying the politics of immigration and integration, pluralism and diversity. It had become obvious that the visibility of religion and public claims for its recognition have changed the parameters of policies with regard to integration once defined in terms of social and economic markers into religious markers. While in the 1960s or 1970s, immigrants expressed their interests in terms of class, the younger generations now express their concern in terms of culture or religion, or any identity reinterpreted in interaction with the cultural and political environment and mobilization. Islam has been defined then in terms of practice, tradition, and moral values. Its perception as a “permanent difference” – both by immigrants and by public authorities – marked a step toward the construction and recognition of an ethnic group, generating an “awareness of belonging” with religion as the emergent ethnicity in Europe (Kastoryano, 2004).

In 1989, the headscarf issue in France and the Rushdie affair in Britain placed Islam at the center of public opinion and of claims made by Muslims migrants from North Africa in France and from South East Asia in Britain. Both cases situated Islam at the core of negotiations challenging the relationship between state and religion in France (Kastoryano, 2002), and of equal treatment of religions and multiculturalism in Britain. In France, state resistance to laïcité on the one hand, and mobilization for claims for institutional representation of Islam on the other reinforced identification of the Muslim population over generations and of diverse nationality who made religious identity paramount over that of national origins. Islam is thus perceived as a source of pride for identification and action and has strengthened the mobilization for representation of a community taking shape around a religious identity, as have ethnic groups in the United States. In France the primacy of religious identification is the result of the interactions between public opinion, public authorities and immigrant groups, rather than the result of a generational process of assimilation as in the United States (Kastoryano, 2004). Recent research in France on “trajectories and origins” of migrants shows how implicitly or explicitly Islam (without being mentioned at all) crosses all the themes that are analyzed: relation to the country of origin, way of life, values, discrimination, secularism, and so on. It emphasizes that nationality does not eliminate the perception of exclusion and rejection, and sends the image of “origin” to the second generation. In general the research shows, without naming it, how religion is transformed into a “minority identity”, or “minority culture” or “origin” in France (Beauchemin, Hamel & Simon, 2016).

In Britain, a country where the Anglican Church represents the state religion, questions of separation and representation are not all posed in the same terms as in France. The United Kingdom considers that Islam should be respected on the same footing as other religions. That implies extending the blasphemy law that applies to Christianity to Islam. Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic Verses sparked indignation among the Muslim population, which found the content offensive and blasphemous to Islam and its prophet. Part of the diaspora thus appropriated a Muslim identity that had become politicized, demanding justice, equal rights, representation and recognition (Werbner, 2000). Similar demands were heard in the wake of caricatures of Prophet Mohammed that were published in a Danish newspaper in 2005.

The Rushdie affair thus triggered an identity movement drawing on multiculturalist policies to demand the inclusion of Islam within this framework. According to Tariq Modood, Muslims are not considered as an ethnic group in equality legislation or in anti-discrimination laws, whereas religion is an essential element of the ethnic identity of British citizens of Asian origin. This political indifference to Islam, or rather, its exclusion from the “politics of recognition,” works to Islam’s detriment and puts it on the sidelines of public
debate (Modood, 2005). Furthermore, even though multiculturalism policy aims to guarantee equal opportunity in education and employment, a large body of research shows young people of South Asian origin, particularly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, the majority of them Muslims, to be disadvantaged from a socio-economic standpoint. In Britain, the definition of the other in racial terms and the fight against discrimination had placed “black identity” on the political agenda of antiracist activists. In fact, “in 1982, the Commission for Racial Equality, well aware that Asians disagreed, had categorized all minorities as ‘black,’ because that was ‘the conventional way now of regarding all those who suffer from the particular disadvantage related to colour’” (Joppke, 1998). Activists intended to make “political blackness” the center of antiracist mobilizations at the European level. This was not, however, an identity South East Asian populations identified with, as they define themselves more as Muslim and Asian, in other words in terms of religion and nationality or ethnicity, often related (Modood, 2005). The current debate over multiculturalism in Britain thus raises the question of redefining “race” so as to include Muslims in the populations that need to be protected against discrimination. According to Tariq Modood, Asians are the “Other” and pose “complex empirical questions” that he analyzes in terms of cultural rather than racial exclusion (Modood, 2005). In the United Kingdom, as in France, there has been an “ethnicization” of religion, expressed by demands for cultural and institutional recognition (Kastoryano, 2004).

Neither British nor German Enlightenment are hostile to religion. The Aufklärung (Enlightenment philosophy) was not really against religion, just as rationality was not against Protestant piety; it meant both modernization and secularization. Beyond nationalism, religion plays an important role in the search for social cohesion, mainly in the definition of solidarities. After the formation of the German state, the Kulturkampf was, as in France, characterized by an effort to guarantee social cohesion by minimizing the role of the Catholic Church while limiting Protestant influence on politics as well. After the state was created, churches organized into associations, and pressure groups influenced the establishment of the “welfare state.” With regard to Islam, in Germany it is nationality (Turkish in this case) that has been for a long time the primary source for ethnicity. The cleavages in terms of religion in France and in terms of nationality in Germany correspond to these states’ understandings of difference and ethnicity. From the perspective of migrant populations, their identities as minorities within Europe appear to be contiguous with their collective identities with their home countries where national and religious identities are closely related. Claims for religious recognition in the new country of citizenship have turned the Türkenn Problem into a “Muslim question” in Germany (Schader, 2017).

Diversity and the institutionalization of religious otherness

Obviously, if religion appears empirically as the main cleavage, its recognition in European countries is translated in terms of institutional setting with regard to the relationship between state and religion of each country. Public recognition of identities reinforces the inventive character of identities, an awareness of belonging to a specific group that asserts its difference with regard to its cultural, social and economic environment. It imposes also the adoption of new features of identity that seem relevant and legitimate in a minority situation. While the political and normative issue remains justice and equality, the social issue has become the ethnicization of a “religious minority”, with Islam as the main identity element, thus cementing a “legitimate community” to institutionalize. Its recognition on the same register as other institutionalized religions in different European countries has become fundamental
for equal treatment of all religions. The process implies the reshaping of existing institutions so as to provide for the general recognition of Islam or, as Bhikhu Parekh suggests, to extend these institutions to include the newly emerging Islam in European societies (Parekh, 2000). What is at stake is the contemporary acceptance of Islam as part of Europe’s historical continuity, to place Islam as a new religion represented and recognized in relation to the established principles that govern the interaction between church and state in the history of each country. Recognition of a new religion has thus spawned a general revision of the place of religions in the public sphere, challenging the concept of secularism with regard to pluralism and equal representation. Researchers in European countries, as if to assert historic continuity, developed normative “inclusionist” perspectives along with liberal democratic principles.

In France, laïcité, an important element of national history, is related to the institutional setting of religion and its contextual accommodations. The separation of church and state confers institutional legal status on the Catholic clergy, the Protestants of the National Federation of Protestant Churches of France, and the Jews governed by the Consistory created under Napoleon. With Islam as an emerging religion, the extension of institutional recognition for equal representation defined as a pluralist promotion of diversity had the objective that such an institutional representation lead to “an official recognition which in its turn would lead to the institutionalization of differences” (Lochack, 1989). This process clearly aims to develop an Islam which will express itself and grow within the framework of national institutions. The latter assumes its liberation from foreign influences, especially those of the homeland.

In Britain, a new vision of multiculturalism for Tariq Modood is to extend the privileges of the Church of England, an “institutional figure of England’s and British national identity,” to other faiths in order to achieve a “multicultural nationalism” (Modood, 2017). Non-denominational state schools should also include compulsory religious education of all faiths as a part of a national curriculum. It seems that two different national histories, and different relationships between Church and State, lead to different perspectives of equal representation of religion within the institutional settings of each nation, and the understanding of the public sphere.

In Germany, the same question regarding the public recognition of Islam affects in a more complex way the status of Turks as an ethnic minority, based on both a Turkish national identity and a Muslim religious identity. Therefore, recognition by public authorities of a “Muslim community” was broadly proclaimed as a means of integrating Turkish immigrants into German society. The argument was firmly based on the official place of religion in German public space and the role of churches in taking care of foreigners in the manner of a “religious society” (Religionsgesellschaft). Recognition, within the legal framework of the corporate body of public law (Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts) from which other religions in Germany benefit, has raised questions about the place of Islam in public instruction, just as with the Christian faiths. Despite different approaches Germany has emphasized the “dialogue” with the creation of the Deutsche Islam Konferenz in 2006. Local, regional and federal authorities are involved in the formation of “German Muslims”, that is to install Islam as a part of religious pluralism in Germany and to control extremist activities. The expressed objective is that a “mutual comprehension among religions will lead to a better integration of Muslims, and a better communication and respect of liberal democratic values in which modern Islam can grow and develop in Germany.”

All European countries work on the liberation of Islam from foreign influences, especially those of the homeland, with the idea of “nationalizing” Islam. Belgium and the Netherlands also integrated Islam into the religious “pillarization” of their respective countries very early.
Spain launched a petition for Islam to be officially recognized alongside Protestantism and Judaism in 1989.

Despite different national histories, interpretations, and definitions of social cohesion, distinctions between private and public and the neutrality of the state regarding religion are both sources of contradictions when states confront Islam. Although Islam constitutes one element of pluralism and diversity among ethnic groups in the United States, Islam emerges as a “minority religion” in European nation-states. Such a conceptual difference is reflected in the different understandings of the recognition of diversity in European countries and the United States. The general trend clearly aims to organize a transition from Islam in different European countries to a “European Islam,” from the simple presence of Muslims and their visible practices to an Islam which will express itself and grow within the framework of national institutions. By institutionalizing Islam, states, “nationalize” the new religion established on their territory. The process would liberate Islam from home countries’ nationalisms and from globalized forces.

The question of institutional setting is not only a compensation of religious inequality and response to claims for equal representation of an ethno-religious minority; it aims also to promote values as a basis for cultural and religious recognition as a way to integrate “otherness”, in everyday life and in “mentalité.” The debate opens the way obviously to variations on the theme of secularism and religious diversity from a normative perspective. Overcoming religious discrimination is at stake. If the principle of secularism refers indeed to the neutrality of the state before religions, its reconceptualization is required to overcome its internal paradoxes, source of tensions and differentiations. The issue is not the resistance of secularism but its redefinition.

However, whatever the ideology and the objective of policies of integration (social, cultural or institutional), states are confronted with the transnational actions of the activists who try to bypass states in order to reach a global perspective of their mobilization. After 9/11, the question of secularism and religious integration are focused on security, which comes to extend the boundaries of otherness beyond national territories.

**Religious boundaries beyond borders**

Even though empirically the political identity of Muslim immigrants has been shaped and developed primarily according to their specific relations with each state, the international agenda for Muslims is expressed through transnational networks throughout Europe and beyond. Their scope is broad and expansive with regard to nationality of origin, regional identity, and even denominations. Such networks are built on common interests defined and formulated at the European level in terms of equality of rights expressed beyond nation-states, before supranational institutions. The elaboration of transnational structures clearly reveals multiple references and allegiances: to the host country, to the home country, to the constructed transnational community and to the European Union as a democratic space for claims and participation as well as for free circulation. Whether or not immigrants are citizens, their loyalty to the host country comes from sharing in its social and political institutions. The home country, despite its cultural and ethnic heterogeneity, provides emotional support and identity resources. A transnational community combining both host and home country ties represents a new reference of involvement that gives rise to the formation of a transnational identity as inspiration for political action and as an instrument for cultural and religious purposes beyond national borders.
From this perspective, Islam in Europe has provided a basis for trans-state and trans-national organization, with the common identification and experience of being Muslim in Europe. According to Steven Vertovec, religion is better adapted to transnationalism than other forms of identity, since it acquires the indices of transformation in modes of religiosity, enabling it to follow the evolution of the importance of religion in the country of origin (Vertovec, 2002). Religious communities have always been stimulated by secularization to organize themselves into pressure groups and to take action in the domain of international relations, as demonstrated in treaties governing minorities from the 1648 treaties of Westphalia until the 1878 Berlin Conference, partially resumed by the League of Nations after World War I (Preece, 1998).

Above all, a transnational community founded on religion is in essence a multiethnic community, and religion nonetheless provides a common identity for a minority formation in Europe. For Muslims in Europe, their identities fragmented from within by various home and host national identities and denominations, Islam represents increasingly a unifying identity for asserting collective interest and structuring a transnational community that transcends the boundaries. In Europe, the internal fragmentation is centralized around norms and values diffused by supranational institutions in their fight against racism and discrimination and inclusive discourses elaborated by transnational activists on human rights and equal citizenship. The same internal diversity is recentralized also around a common identity element, to wit, religion, which is transnational both in essence and de facto. The process is promoted by international organizations that re-activate the religious loyalty of Muslim populations living in different European countries.

Moreover, diffusion of debates about the current issues involving Muslims, such as the Rushdie affair or the headscarf affair in Europe, or, more broadly, the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, made Islam into a “refuge”, a source of identification with causes “agitating the world” both at local and at transnational/global level. This identification can be seen in the violence perpetrated in the name of a cause that directly or indirectly affects an Islam which is perceived as a “global victim”, an image that is reinforced by the rhetoric of humiliation and domination by the West propounded by its militants. Pnina Werbner points out that “imagining their different diasporas, local Pakistanis tended to position themselves imaginatively as the heroes of global battles”, and argues that “diasporas are transnational communities of co-responsibility” (Werbner, 2002). In an “imagined global diaspora” where individuals and groups and transnational communities are connected in global networks, the traditional diaspora loses its territorial bases in which home is an imagined place to express precisely “co-responsibility” without a territorial reference as “home”. But at the same time, rhetoric surrounding Islam, both localized and non-territorialized, appears as the underpinnings of a “liberation” movement, a new movement of national emancipation, with the effects of identification with a new entity.

These references produce an identity that is not linked to the immediate space but to a non-territorial community, which becomes a refuge for a young generation that is looking for a cause and identification through political action. The process gives rise to the formation of a transnational identity as inspiration for solidarity and religious and cultural mobilization beyond national borders. Their claim is de-nationalized (with regard to the country of origin) and de-territorialized, with reference to a new understanding of a nation that is a transnational nation that creates new expressions of belonging and political engagement (Kastoryano, 2007, 2018). Transnational nationalism leads to a new imagined community that goes against the unified community that is the basic principle of a territorialized political project. The “transnational nation” is imagined on the basis of a religion or an ethnicity that encompasses linguistic and national differences and breaks away from the territorialized
nationalist project to assert itself beyond national borders, without geographical limits, as a de-territorialized nation in search of an inclusive (and exclusive) center, around an identity or an experience constructed out of immigration, dispersion and a minority situation. Reflecting to the states their “deficiency” in human rights, or citizenship as a foundation of democratic equality, the actors seek to channel the loyalty of individuals from territorialized political community towards a non-territorialized political community, thus redefining the terms of belonging and allegiance to a “global nation.” The unity of such a transnational community is sustained by the desire to belong to a “people” through a process of nominal appropriation of its actions and discourses, a sense of participation in its “destiny.” This gives birth to new subjectivities which accompany the imagined geography of the “transnational nation”.

Transnational nationalism, or nationalism without territory, appears to be the result of a historical evolution a priori linked to what has become a global market, to the emergence of a so-called global space and the rising influence of supranational institutions, in short, to changes related to what is known as the process of globalization. The territorial boundaries of these communities are not disputed; on the contrary, their non-territorial boundaries follow formal and/or informal network connections that transcend the territorial limits of states and nations, thus creating a new form of territorialization – invisible and unbounded – and, consequently, a form of political community within which individual actions become the basis for a form of non-territorial nationalism that seeks to strengthen itself through speeches, symbols, images and objects. This reflects the nationalization of communitarian sentiments of religion guided by an “imagined geography” (Kastoryano, 2018).

Some of the activists categorized by Robert Leikin as “Europe’s Angry Muslims” are drawn into a single narrative of belonging to the umma, the reimagined worldwide Muslim community in which national, religious and worldly attachments are all mixed up (Leikin, 2015). Of course the term is reinterpreted in such a way as to reframe all the internal diversity into an “imagined transnational community”, or an “imagined global diaspora”, or even an “imagined global nation” that defines itself as a cultural nation, giving rise to a form of nationalism which can be viewed more as cultural nationalism than as ideological or state nationalism. Such nationalism would be based upon a sense of belonging to a culture that sees itself as being “uprooted”, which leads to a redefining of it in a new environment. Its adaptation or resistance as well as its radicalization lends it a new scope and a new content in which nationalities, ethnicities and religion are blended, thereby cultivating a culture which presents itself as “different” from the environment.

It is not only via immigration that Islam contributes local and non-local elements of identification. And it is not only Islam that develops non-territorial modes of belonging. Non-territoriality is part of a globalization process which more generally affects religions on the whole. Davie refers to “global ecumenism,” a value for global solidarity (Davie, 2007) and Peter Beyer sees in religion a mode of social communication in globalization, a new potential for voluntary activities through networks (Beyer, 1994). With regard to Islam, its politicization since the 1980s has been expressed in various ways throughout the world. Discourses exceeding national limits are developed in a similar fashion both in countries where Islam constitutes the religion of the majority and in diaspora where it emerges as a minority religion. The rhetoric surrounding both territorialized and non-territorialized Islam seems to be the basis for a liberation movement or a new national emancipation movement, with a semblance of identification with a new entity. A form of nationalism arises when they mobilize beyond national borders, and this phenomenon reinforces the interdependency between internal political developments and the involvement of transnational actors in the international political system.

385
New religious boundaries, de-nationalized and de-territorialized, challenge the Westphalian understanding of state and nationhood. Non-territorial although localized religious boundaries in various parts of the world where networks have reach recalls pre-Westphalian conceptions of territory. The path taken is in reverse, however. In 1648, the treaty gave religion territorial value – the sovereign’s territory – and matched political compartmentalization with religious compartmentalization in both law and fact. Territory is thus, according to the geographer Jean Gottmann, at the root of “the differentiation of space” (Gottmann, 2007) in which community and identity overlap, moving from sovereign territorial states to a new geography based on religious divisions.

A reaction to “globalized religions” increasingly producing countries where national and religious identities are combined, are those who are also active in transnational politics, called “diaspora politics” as a means of maintaining the loyalty of the citizens on both their territory of settlement and “abroad.” The main objective is to fight against “global Islam” by re-territorializing and re-nationalizing their belonging, expressed in terms of religion and in control of their citizenry and loyalty abroad as a resource for the transnationalization of the state. The objective then is to counter non-territorial solidarity expressed in global religious terms, which attracts the young generation, who reject any or all national identification, and develop a new “ethnic” pride, a sense of community whose attributes are drawn out of a global religious identification.

Diaspora politics integrates states in the process of globalization and allows them to compete with transnational and global forces. The extension of state nationalism along with an extra-territorial citizenship as translated by diaspora politics confronts a non-territorial, transnational nationalism, de-territorialized and de-nationalized. It aims at redefining solidarity, in order to influence identity expression and mobilization beyond national boundaries, and respond to a nationalism that is extra-territorial as a reaction to a nationalism that is de-territorialized. These reflect the paradox of globalization. If space replaces territory, it re-localizes extra-territorial references and redefines identity boundaries with new inclusions and exclusions. The expansion of state sovereignty beyond its borders generates a new power relationship between the mobility of individuals and the capacity of states to control individuals in movement within and without their borders and leads to a clash of nationalisms on a global scale: national state and territorial nationalism versus transnational religious nationalism, creating new boundaries of otherness beyond borders.

Notes


2 The British law considering blasphemy a crime dates back to the 17th century. It was only abolished in 2008.

3 A perspective that agrees with Andreas Wimmer’s and Nina Glick Schiller’s argument in “methodological nationalism”, the way it has influenced studies on migration – its relations to states, societies, politics and sovereignty. See Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology, International Migration Review, Fall 2003, Vol. 37, No.3, pp. 576–610.

References


Religious otherness

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