

# For a New Alterity of Islam in European Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** *The depiction of Islam and Muslims in Europe has, in general, been dominated by an ‘Othering’ in which they are considered inherently different, because of their ethnic or geographical origin or due to conceptions of Islam as a non-modern phenomenon, incompatible with Western democratic societies. Without ignoring successful integration experiences, recent cases of Islamophobia in Europe demonstrate the continued assumption of the Islamic ‘Other’ from a negative point of view. This otherness is particularly visible in the case of Turkey, which due to its truncated process of accession to the European Union has been subject to constant debates on its Europeanness. To overcome this harmful vision, the application of a democratic ‘Alterity’ is proposed. This allows, based on identity, a dialogue between different parties, in which the other is not only recognized but their position can also be assumed as one’s own.*

**Keywords:** Alterity, Otherness, Identity, Islam in Europe, EU-Turkey Accession Process

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## Introduction

Islam in the West has not only been defined by the experience of immigration and the associated assimilation or integration. Islam has also been portrayed through the West's idea of it in general and of Muslims in particular. The way in which the religion and its practitioners are seen in Europe either fosters a better process of adaptation or pushes to increase expressions of rejection (because of their status as immigrants) or open Islamophobia (in principle, due to their religious biases). The starting point is the assumption of the Muslim as someone different. However, the internalization of another person's difference is not itself a negative thing. In fact, the ability to understand others as different is the basis of the recognition of one's own identity. The problem arises when this 'Otherness' is composed of harmful elements (inadmissible in democratic societies) by which the others become enemies or antithesis whose only treatment is the direct (physical) elimination or their displacement from the shared inhabited space.

This form of 'Other' construction is not new, but it has been generalized in Europe in recent decades as the influx of Muslim communities has risen and they are now a significant percentage of the population though still a minority. As stated by the *Pew Research Center*, the Muslim population in Europe was approximately 4.9 percent in 2016 and its projection for 2020, even considering hypothetical massive numbers of migration, barely surpassed five percent.<sup>1</sup> Despite successful experiences of integration, which have not involved Muslims relinquishing their religious and cultural backgrounds, there are still social sectors reluctant to adapt a more favorable view of Islam. Indeed, political parties which are critical of immigration or openly xenophobic have increased in both number and voter-base in Europe,<sup>2</sup> even coming into control of governments in some countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Austria, or forming blocs within the European parliament as in the case of the Identity and Democracy coalition. The main hypothesis of this article is that this 'Othering' of Muslims has been done in an inappropriate way in which they are still viewed as a threat to European 'identity.' Instead of negatively 'Othering' Muslim immigrants to Europe, this article proposes development of a new alterity, in which the other is recognized as someone different with whom disagreements can be resolved by democratic discussion.

For this purpose, it will be necessary to utilize a democratic version of the alterity. According to this, in addition to recognizing the identity through the difference of the others, it is possible to put oneself in the place of the other to look at the position of one's own self from the outside, in order to better understand both positions. However, prior to such theoretical proposal, it is mandatory to define what this 'Otherness' refers to, for which a brief presentation will be made on how the image of Islam has been conceived in Europe; taking Turkey's pro-

cess of accession to the European Union as a primary example. In recent years Turkey's 'Europeanization' has been a center of debate and fertile ground for its 'demonization' by European audiences. The aim of this article is to bring some ideas to the discussion on the treatment of Islam in contemporary European societies.

**If it were accepted that religion is an essential element of being European, then Islam would represent the 'Other' to what Europe means**

### **The Otherness of Islam in the European Perspective**

The elaboration of the 'Other' is a key element in the social sciences. It makes possible the differentiation –and simultaneously the reaffirmation of one's own identity– of certain social groups based on several realms and in micro and macro levels within society. The fundamental idea of 'Othering' is the establishment of limits that define who belongs to an identity group and who does not. As Kastoryano indicates, "Defining the 'Other' requires drawing real or symbolic boundaries. Boundaries lead to internal differentiation creating social, cultural, and moral categories; they generate hierarchies among cultures; in short, they engender complex relations where each element constitutes a micro-sociological basis."<sup>3</sup> When the limits are extended to a national level, they do not only aim at defining a sense of political unity (through the borders or national symbols) but also pretend to cement a collective national identity. In such macro projection, the parameters of belonging to an imaginary 'us' are determined by symbolic elements, such as a shared history, or a common set of values, or by a normative body that differentiates us from them, the 'Others,' from a formal point of view. "The passage from cultural boundaries to political boundaries is realized through the institutionalization of sameness and difference; a process through which identities –religious, linguistic, racial– are elaborated."<sup>4</sup> In the case of Europe, according to Kastoryano, its identity has been built on a narrative that involves "shared constitutive historical experiences: the Roman Empire, Christianity, the enlightenment, and industrialization. Since the Muslims were not influenced by those experiences, they could never truly be Europeans."<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, then religion has been an element used to forge national identities while other religions' members are considered as different. It had an important role in the wars of religion in Europe, in the treatment of Jewish communities even much before the World War II or the consideration of Medieval Muslims as enemies or infidels whose "belief had to be disproved or mocked, and social behavior distorted and denigrated."<sup>6</sup> Despite modern nation-states in Europe adopting a secular vision, the increased Muslim migrant flows in the last decades, due to diverse causes such as labor migration, family reunification, or as refugees, have posed a debate as to whether religion is still an element of

## **Equality constitutes a subjective right that, along with freedom, represents the most genuine expression of the liberal legal framework on which modern discourse is based**

differentiation (at the same time of identification) that a pretended European identity can use in opposition to others. Of course, the religious tradition to which Europe supposedly belongs is Christianity (itself not a homogeneous entity at the theological or institutional level). If it were accepted that religion is an essential element of being European, then Islam would represent the 'Other' to what Europe means. As Kastoryano points out again, "Islam as a way of 're-appropriating identity in politics makes religion the emergent ethnicity in Europe."<sup>7</sup> But if religion is not an element of an alleged Europeanness, then Muslims are simply another identity group requesting official respect in equalitarian states. In this way, "those Muslims who have become citizens in the West are now mobilizing for the recognition and representation of Islam within national societies."<sup>8</sup> In any case, the increase of Muslims in Europe represents a challenge to secularism –any version of it– on which, at least formally, European countries have tried to build pluralistic societies.

Often the objective of such plurality has taken a multiculturalist path, which deals with the challenge of making equality and difference compatible within the framework of the rule of law. Equality constitutes a subjective right that, along with freedom, represents the most genuine expression of the liberal legal framework on which modern discourse is based. Both rights are consolidated as a guarantee in favor of citizens before the state, which is called, not only to respect them as minimal prerogatives that individuals have but also to protect them as fundamental bases that citizens need in order to develop their own life projects. Such freedom and equality are declared, in the area of a constitutional state, before the law, which is consequently assumed as impartial and neutral in relation to citizens who are regarded as equal. On the other hand, difference concerns the cognition that equality, as understood by the classical Liberal State, is barely formal, because society is certainly diverse, and its major legal endeavor is seen in its inclusion as a right in recent constitutions, which can be identified as 'inequality among the equals' because of its establishment as a constitutional norm of multiculturalism.

However, critics of multiculturalism have indicated that this approach stimulates fragmentation of societies rather than integration, increasing radicalism at both sides, the indigenous Europeans and the immigrant (or descendant of immigrants) Muslims: "Arguments are grounded in the effect of multicultural-



ism on the economic, cultural, and political isolation of communities –ethnic violence perceived as a result of identity politics that failed to ensure civic harmony. Multiculturalism in Europe has then switched to restrictive immigration policies.”<sup>9</sup> These policies are based on preconceived factors of belonging related to language, moral values, democratic principles, and knowledge of national history or law, requirements that Muslims are not supposed to fulfill. Such requirements are pretended to create integration but in fact, they lead to bigger segregation within a fractured society. According to this critic, “Europe has allowed excessive immigration without demanding enough integration –a mismatch that has eroded social cohesion, undermined national identities, and degraded public trust.”<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence, after 9/11 and attacks on European cities in the last fifteen years, the ‘Othering’ of Islam has been attempted to be built as a different whole at the highest sociocultural level. In other words, ‘Othering’ has been used to depict Islam as a different model of society and even an opposed civilization just like some orientalists attempted to portray in the 1990s. Following ideas proposed by Bernard Lewis, Huntington affirmed that “on both sides, the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a ‘clash of civilizations.’ The West’s next confrontation is definitely going to come from the Muslim World.”<sup>11</sup> Thereby depicting Islam as a transnational threat to a pretended civilizational base. As Francois and Souris indicate, “failures in the integration of the European Muslim community has fueled the sense of ‘otherness’ and allowed the emergence of a ‘Muslim’ political category that has been framed

The Virgin Mary and child mosaic fresco on a dome and a calligraphic Roundel with Arabic letters bearing the name of Allah hanging on one of the columns of the Hagia Sophia mosque. Istanbul, Turkey on July 2, 2020.

ÖZAN KÖSE / AFP

## Despite the Western and European orientation that Turkey experienced during the consolidation of the Republic which established secularism as the cornerstone of the new political body, its acceptance in the 'European Club' has not been complete

were related to issues such as terrorism, immigration, or war. Similar findings were exposed by Jamil who deployed another meta-analysis including 353 studies on media representation of Muslims and Islam between 2010 and 2019. Among her conclusions, she asseverates that “media has targeted Islam and Muslims by relating them to terrorist activities and events around the world. This has made them questionable (...) Media demonstration about Muslims has not only affected them in routine social setups but this has also enforced government level policies to get affected.”<sup>14</sup> This idea is shared by *SETA Foundation* which in its last European Islamophobia Report reviews the role played by the media in the challenging or spreading of fears and prejudices against Islam and Muslims, many times caused by misleading features. Therefore it underlines that “when certain press outlets construe false ideas about Muslims or Islamic institutions, politicians act accordingly.”<sup>15</sup> The analysis not only covers mainstream media but also extends to the internet where Islamophobic attacks have increasingly taken place in the last years.

In its turn, Creutz-Kämpfi attempts to demonstrate that mass media representations of Islam have created pictures of it as an ‘outside world’ that allows the construction of the self-identity by opposition to the external Other: “Islam is depicted as the Other –as an antipode to Europe or ‘the Western world.’ Europe instead is given the role of an entity where ‘one’s own and the right values and traditions are to be found –the ‘We’ category as a collective refers to Europeans.”<sup>16</sup> Those values and cultural features have then the function of drawing up the requirements and boundaries of a collective identity, in this case, the European, in contrast to the others, outside those limits and not able to pass the belonging test. “The ‘Other’ is not only a stereotype of what is unfamiliar and excluded, but also an opposite in the sense of self-categorization –an imaginary collective gets its distinct form and substance when it is mirrored against the

in opposition to European liberal states.”<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, such restrictions and lack of integration lead some Muslims in Europe into more radical postures that reinforce the prejudice against the local hosts.

Media have played a crucial role in this process of ‘Othering.’ For instance, Ahmed and Matthes show how despite an almost marginal covering of Muslims in European mass media, they are mainly framed in a negative view while “Islam is portrayed as a violent religion.”<sup>13</sup> After reviewing 345 studies regarding the construction of the Muslims and the Islamic identity in the media from 2000 to 2015, they found that most of the references

idea of an outer collective.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, a dichotomy between Europe (self, us) and Islam (the Other, them) is created which in its turn becomes a tautology in the process of the creation of alien and own identities. Such a process is composed of depictions that shape dominant discourses and visions of Islam before the European audience. As Creutz-Kämpfi indicates, “as well as the othering, media representations of Islam and Muslims create a specific kind of picture of Islam and Muslims, and they also have an influence on the kinds of categories for self-identifications that are produced– defining ‘a Westerner’ or ‘a European.’”<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the latter, Creutz-Kämpfi has identified four discourses on which the otherness of Islam has been built in the European press, related to i) violence, which the press sees as inherent to Islamic culture or religion and attempts to use to explain all violent events as demonstrations of Islamic expressions; ii) colonialism, involving racist and ethno-centrist features, that presents Islam as backwards and presupposes a more advanced West in social and political terms; iii) secularization, in virtue of which an ‘Enlightened’ West had had the ability to successfully separate state and religion while Islam has fallen behind and not even reforms can ‘modernize’ it; iv) clash of civilizations, following Huntington’s approach, that emphasizes the cultural nature of conflicts after the Cold War being the most relevant factor in the struggle between Islam and the Western civilization. These discourses, of course, surpass their symbolic character and achieve performative nature. Even so, it can be discussed whether the ‘Othering’ of Islam in European mass media is a reflection of its societies or if on the contrary, it is a reality constructed within them through effective symbolic representations. Related to this, Relevy maintains that “although Islam has been part of the landscape of Western societies for decades, it is still regarded as different and foreign.”<sup>19</sup>

## The Turkish Question

The ‘Othering’ of Islam in Europe gains special importance when addressing Turkey. It has been an object of debate in the discussion about European identity. Despite the Western and European orientation that Turkey experienced during the consolidation of the Republic which established secularism as the cornerstone of the new political body, its acceptance in the ‘European Club’ has not been complete. In 1949 Turkey became a member of the Council of Europe, and in the 1950s, after having joined the American coalition in the Korean War, Turkey was admitted as a NATO member. In the 1960s Turkey first entered the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), soon after the “Ankara Agreement” that created an association between Turkey and the European Economic Community was signed. The final step towards integration was Turkey’s accession to the European Economic Community, which is applied for in 1987. However, two years later the Euro-

Austrian author Peter Handke (L), who had previously publicly denied the genocide against Sarajevo's Muslims, receives his Nobel Prize for Literature from King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden (R) during the Award ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 10, 2019.

JONAS EKSTROMER / Getty Images



pean Commission rejected the Turkish application alleging democratic deficiencies. In 1995, a Customs Union with Europe was achieved which seemed to be the prelude to Turkey's definitive accession. Despite the reluctance in a 1997 meeting, the Helsinki European Council in 1999 granted Turkish candidacy. "The argument was that in order to open accession talks, Turkey had to fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria for membership and make progress towards resolving the Cyprus problem as well as bilateral conflicts with Greece."<sup>20</sup> A set of accelerated reforms after 2001 –many of them promoted by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*- henceforth the AK Party) rule, initiated in November 2002-led to a statement by the European Council on fulfillment of criteria and the opening of talks which began in October 2005. Despite the enthusiasm and the initial boost to the project of entering the European Union, the delay in negotiations has not only politically distanced Europe and Turkey but has also devised a set of 'Othering' depictions.

As Ağcasulu and Ossewaarde state, "since the accession negotiations inaugurated, the European identity and Turkey's otherness have been two interconnected and dependent notions in the discourses (...) Particularly, Turkey's accession bid called for an ontological inquiry into the nature of EU"<sup>21</sup> This inquiry has had two faces: on the one hand, at the political level, it has posed a debate between sympathizers and opponents to the Turkish candidacy. The predominant argument among politicians opposed to the Turkish candidacy is

the ‘non-European’ nature of Turkey. As a response, the promoters argue for candidacy on the grounds that Turkey shares European ideals of democratic and institutional developments rather than an inherency question. On the other hand, the ‘Otherness’ of Turkey has been reinstated on the basis of a three-dimensional framework: Turkey is different for historical, geographic, and religious reasons.

**The ‘Other’ has been depicted not only as different but also as an enemy. Maybe a new way to construct ‘Otherness’ can be helpful. Therefore, the elaboration of a new concept of Alterity is proposed**

Most of the discourses on Turkish civilizational compatibility base their arguments on the differences of historical evolutions. Historically, discourses against Turkey have two assumptions emphasizing inherent differences. The first one is that European legacy represents a progression from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment and is the product of this linear history. The second assumption is that homogeneous European culture and its values are culturally and essentially internal to its participants.<sup>22</sup>

The geography has also been used as an argument to describe Turkey’s nature as different. Traditional representations of Turkey treat it as a bridge between Europe and Asia, Eastern and Western, the Christian and the Islamic Worlds, even between the EU and the Arab World. Because of these characteristics, Turkey has been called a ‘hinge state’ in geographical as well as in political terms.<sup>23</sup> However, it is not enough to fulfill the Europeanization parameters to be considered a European country. Finally, regarding religious considerations, the “representation of Islam as the other of Christian Europe has not been positive. As observed by many scholars, Islam for centuries, and Islamophobia nowadays, (has been) framed as threat to Europe and Christianity.”<sup>24</sup> For Ağcasulu and Ossewaard, religion is a hegemonic referent in the construction of the European identity in which Christianity involves more than religious faith and is assumed as the base of civilization order and culture besides being the phenomenon that enabled the secularism. Because of this ‘inherent’ European feature, a country in its turn considered inherently Muslim, like Turkey, cannot be accepted and integrated into the European community.

For their part, Ertuğrul and Yılmaz consider that the otherness of Turkey by Europe within the process of accession to the EU is based on two components: “a civic political-legal-institutional model (civic-normative identity) and value-based cultural references with historical and religious overtones (cultural identity).”<sup>25</sup> Such differentiation led to the construction of Turkey’s otherness by Europe, at least regarding the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through two different stages. Firstly, as Copenhagen criteria were fulfilled and reforms were held by Ankara

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aiming at opening of talks (during the aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq War deployment), Turkey was depicted as a model for the Islamic world: a country where modern and civic institutions could get along with culturally Islamic society. At least on a discursive level, the alleged incompatibility between Islam and democracy, recurrent in Orientalist approaches,<sup>26</sup> was dismissed. Later, as the accession process stagnated and the AK Party rule

allegedly started to turn toward authoritarianism (especially after Gezi protests in 2013), the image of Turkey returned to traditional negative standards for Muslim countries while simultaneously an immigration crisis led to the proliferation of ultra-nationalist and xenophobic political parties in Europe.

### **Elements for a New Alterity**

As seen, the process of ‘Othering’ of Turkey by Europe and has involved negative features. It is believed to be due to the way in which such ‘Otherness’ has been conceived. The ‘Other’ has been depicted not only as different but also as an enemy. Maybe a new way to construct ‘Otherness’ can be helpful. Therefore, the elaboration of a new concept of Alterity is proposed. These ideas were discussed within my doctoral dissertation on Philosophy of Law and it can be alleged that most of its bibliographical sources belong to a ‘Western’ theoretical tradition. However, after living in Turkey for several years and examining the conditions of Muslims in Europe, I have found an adequate scenario for its practical application.

In that regard, the democratic Alterity involves the transition towards an intersubjective and communicative conception, where the identity of *alter ego* can be recognized, allowing one by this way to understand and even to defend the position of the other through the ability to assume it as if it were one’s own. This progress toward an intersubjective model is conceived on the basis of integration of identities capable, not only to recognize but also to respect and understand different and even contrary positions. In relation to its conceptual framework, ‘Otherness’ was already a recurrent idea in philosophy. Aristotle understood it as a means for the recognition of the other (and simultaneously awareness of one’s own individuality), and as an expression of the political nature of the human being. Theodosiadis argues that ‘Otherness’ emerges not only as a way for human beings to recognize themselves as different and unique but also as the possibility of interacting and establishing communication or dia-

logue with others.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Otherness’ occupies an important place, and is assumed as a concern for the other, in a relationship that should not be seen as a confrontation, but as a mutual liability. “From the moment, in which the others look at me, I am responsible for them without even having to take responsibilities in the relationship with them; their responsibility concerns me. It is a responsibility that goes beyond of what I do.”<sup>28</sup> A philosophy of otherness in which the ‘other’ is not considered a rival or an opponent of the ‘self,’ constitutes the other as a possibility of our own identity in a socially responsible sphere, where human beings look after one another.

Consequently, the otherness proposed here seeks to reformulate the understanding of each other as different, aiming at assuming its own position in order to comprehend their arguments better and to look at one’s own arguments from the outside in a coetaneous combination of internal and external points of view. It is a complete inter-subjectivity because of which the existence and vision of the other are not only accepted but there is also disposal to assume that vision and even to defend it, as a form of respect for the difference. Therefore, such otherness is not supported by mere tolerance or passive coexistence but is an active attitude that pursues the dialogue, the understanding, and the consensus for the achievement of agreements on fundamental aspects. For this purpose, it is necessary to take into consideration the element of identity which is constituted as the factor of singling out the subject, from which it can be characterized as unique and at the same time determine what distinguishes him from the other. In this way, it comes to be an unavoidable and necessary presupposition for the constitution of otherness. The identity may be individual or collective. However, taking into account that this ‘identification’ with a group is in the majority of cases a voluntary decision, a problem with respect to collective political identity arises. Such difficulty lies in that the attachment often occurs by reference to elements that are not easily classifiable in political terms. As Gutmann highlights, “yet no one should doubt that identification with others makes a difference in how individuals perceive their own interests, psychological experiments demonstrate that something as basic as self-image changes when individuals identify with others. And remarkably, a difference in self-image can be based on a seemingly irrelevant identification with others.”<sup>29</sup>

Gutmann draws attention to the need to establish a relationship between the identity groups and democratic politics, in which the first ones are only politically significant as their members, attracted by a mutual identification, can be organized as interest or pressure groups. Only if they comply with this requirement could they effectively call themselves identity groups and accordingly pursue identity politics, which ultimately would be of political difference. As the author exposes, “although mutual identification is basic to human existence, it has been neglected in democratic theory, where the language of ‘interest’ and ‘interest group’ rather than identity and identity groups is far more common.”<sup>30</sup>

## The barriers to Turkey not only feed the prejudices against Turks and Muslims in Europe but also produce as feedback a negative construction of the 'Otherness' of Europe before Turkish eyes

Thus, the latter will only have legal and political incidence if they are then recognized as interest groups. Muslims in Europe (of course, not considered as a monolithic body), beyond simple identity groups could be pursued to be recognized as interest groups. Even so, not all groups organized and recognized as interest groups are politically significant associations or demo-

cratically acceptable. So, organizations that are against democratic principles or that promote the violation of the law (unless they are justifiable cases of civil disobedience), would not be admissible because their identities, although they are group-like by affiliation, would not be democratic. As an example of these groups, Gutmann refers to the *Ku Klux Klan* in the United States, which she says constitutes a negative attachment that should be prevented from the democratic point of view. Extrapolating Europe, xenophobic organizations (or Jihadist groups on the Muslim side) are not plausible either.

Having said that, the recognition of the other as an adversary should not represent a difficulty. Instead, it should constitute an important occasion for understanding otherness, in democratic terms, also as the ability to recognize the opposing position of the other, which should be understood and admitted as democratically acceptable. But as mentioned before, such recognition may not constitute simple tolerance, since this implies a negative sense of otherness, in which the 'other' is barely resisted and 'stands' without a genuine interest in knowing others' arguments. Therefore, the active difference in antagonistic terms must also involve an approach to the others with an attitude of responsibility before them, as a dilution of the self in the other, in the style of Levinas. It does not imply an essentialist perspective, that is, it does not require understanding identity (their own and the different one) as something immanent, but as a process that is 'constructed' with the other, both of which are extensible and applicable, of course, to the other meanings of difference and otherness in general. Thus, the ambitions of superiority or dominance in the relationship of mutual understanding with the other are weakened, and hegemonic otherness is avoided.

A new approach to difference in which 'Otherness' is assumed as something positive –even desirable– with the subject from whose identity such difference is constructed being able to see from another's point of view, could be useful to advance in the integration of Muslim communities in Europe. Besides, it would pay tribute to European values by considering diversity as a positive phenomenon that contributes to the strengthening of democracy. An interest-



Britain's incoming London Mayor Sadiq Khan (C) attends his swearing-in ceremony at Southwark Cathedral in Central London on May 7, 2016, becoming the first Muslim leader of a major Western capital.

YUI MOK / AFP via Getty Images

ing case can be found in the United Kingdom where the features of integration are hopeful. According to the Muslim Council of British, “a growing proportion (89 percent in 2015-2016) thought their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well, and despite claims to the contrary, Muslim communities have become less segregated according to the latest Census.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in 2016, London elected a Muslim as mayor which demonstrates that recurrent myths on the disinterest of Muslims on democratic issues are to be disregarded.

Circumstances reveal the possibilities of different othering of Islam and Muslims in the European perspective. As Relevy defends, “the dichotomous view (between Muslims and Europeans) maintains segregation and impedes the integration of immigrants.”<sup>32</sup> Because of this, Europeans need to get over the traditional way in which they have posed their differences with the Muslims and the method through which Islam has been seen as a threatening other. European societies “need to find a common ground and make an effort to redefine themselves as heterogeneous immigrant societies while taking into consideration the Muslim presence, with its diversity and uniqueness.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, ‘Alterity’ can become a process whereby certain traditionally marginalized groups manage to be recognized as distinct collectivities and, to that extent, begin to gain admittance to social and political spaces which they have historically been denied access to at the same time. It is necessary to pursue the introduction of otherness as an experience of practical reason in society, so groups from their own political identities can participate in public discussions.

Finally, as Creutz-Kämpfi warns, “collective representations are more than the sum of individual opinions –they form the network of social life, establishing meanings and creating feelings of belonging through communication and social interaction.”<sup>34</sup> The role of media in the building of such representations is fundamental. Therefore, the switch in the way that Islam is ‘othering’ by Europe must be extended to the press passing from a conflict-oriented approach to a new one with “opposite premises –worlds of knowledge in which interaction is a routine and daily *praxis*.”<sup>35</sup> It can foster an understanding that Islam has been and still is an important part of European history and has had contributions to the forging of European societies which in principle do not attend to religious issues when establishing differences within their citizens and are also culturally diverse.

## Conclusion

Islam and the Muslims have been depicted as the ‘Other’ of Europe at different levels. Since their consideration as non-belonging to a shared historic tradition until the assumption of Islam as a complete distinct civilization. Such determination of ‘Otherness’ has unfortunately been made in negative terms that have shown Islam as a threat to a pretended homogeneous community of values that Europe constitutes. The increase of the Muslim population in the last decades and the reiterated portrayal of Islam in the European press as a ‘problem,’ have led to a differentiated treatment of Muslims despite the multicultural or pluralist approach that can be found in the constitutional base of European states. Without denying good results regarding integration and respect for difference in some countries, in general, the ‘Otherness’ of Islam has been harmful, which commonly turns into discrimination, racism, or open Islamophobia, with concerning the growth of political proposals based on xenophobic discourses.

Turkey has been particularly targeted with this way of construction of European ‘Otherness.’ Its extended and fruitless accession process to the EU, despite all the reformist efforts to fulfill the standards imposed to be admitted in the ‘club,’ suggests the existence of reasons beyond institutional ones, more related to the questioned Europeanness of Turkey. Although there are pretexts of historic, geographic, or normative order, motives seem to be of religious nature, due to its majoritarian Muslim population. The barriers to Turkey not only feed the prejudices against Turks and Muslims in Europe but also produce as feedback a negative construction of the ‘Otherness’ of Europe before Turkish eyes. Hence, untrust becomes a double-way phenomenon.

It is at this point that a new conception of alterity can offer alternatives. Although it can be initially assumed as a mere theoretical approach, the empirical development of a new ‘Othering’ of Muslims in Europe has a myriad of possibilities. It can be seen not only in the several cases of successful integration

that Muslim subjects, individually considered, and communities have experienced in European countries but also in some official and non-government programs fostering integration, such as in the UK where the Muslim Council has focused on the suppression of myths about immigration. There are also media (not necessarily alternative)

whose approach regarding Islam is free of prejudices and contains accurate analyses on citizenship and rights. The same can be said regarding some media in the Turkish press when ‘personifying’ the EU. However, efforts are not enough, and hostile ‘Othering’ is still predominant. Therefore, the main purpose is that the ‘Alterity’ becomes an essential criterion in the processes of public deliberation, in which the creative activity of citizens stimulates their participation, as in the stages of legal discussion and allocation or in the debate of public policies that affect them. This would not only contribute to greater legitimacy of the contexts of legal and policy creation and decision, but it could also have significant effects on their effectiveness.

In the case of Muslims in Europe, their configuration as interest groups is fundamental. Under such condition, they can build platforms to participate, whether political or not. In any case, the political representation is important as it will allow a direct incidence in the discussion and adoption of policies involving them. Until now, debate around Islam within the EU looks like a scenario where Europeans make decisions that affect Muslims in their absence. In this sense, the conquest of spaces in institutions is vital in the purpose of building a different narrative on Islam. Institutional activism can be accompanied by more aggressive media campaigns that confront the dominant approaches against Muslims in European press. Only if Europe assumes Islam as an ‘Other’ whose differences are not considered negative features but that contribute to improvement of European values, it will be possible to advance in the discussion of issues related to the own future of EU such as citizenship, rights, and the own configuration of supranational organization. Therefore, a new alterity of Islam in European perspective will have an impact on the consideration of Turkey and the future of relations with Europe either in or out of the Union. ■

## **Institutional activism can be accompanied by more aggressive media campaigns that confront the dominant approaches against Muslims in European press**

### **Endnotes**

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