

# The shaping of Islam and Islamophobia in Belgium

SAMI ZEMNI

*Abstract:* The author discusses the way in which Islam has been cast as a political problem in Belgium and how Muslims have, particularly in Flanders, become framed by politicians and commentators in the media as a threat. The actual socioeconomic difficulties that Muslims (particularly those of Turkish and Moroccan descent) face are being redrawn as problems stemming from their culture and religion. State agencies are trying to shape the political organisation that will represent Belgian Muslims, as the issue of Islam is increasingly debated in terms of the 'clash of civilisations', and secularism and the Enlightenment are linked in public debate with a Christian Europe.

*Keywords:* *allochtoon*, burka, clash of civilisations, EMB, Flanders, headscarf, *inburgering*, integration, Islamophobia, Moroccans, Muslims, Vlaams Blok/Belang

## Introduction

Amid its deepest political crisis since the Second World War, Belgian senators found the time to approve a legal proposition to prohibit women from wearing clothing that hid their faces in public. Only the resignation of the government and the subsequent elections permitted France to steal the Belgian scoop.

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*Sami Zemni* is a professor at Ghent University (Belgium), based at the Centre of Third World Studies, where he coordinates the Middle East and North Africa Research Group. His area of expertise is politics within the Middle East and North Africa region, with special reference to political Islam and issues related to Islam in Europe. The author would like to thank Christopher Parker and Koen Bogaert for sharing knowledge, ideas, criticism and enthusiasm during the researching and writing of this essay.

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Perhaps the legislators were aware of the fact that an anti-burka law was a bit extreme, so they consciously avoided the term in the proposed law. The law will penalise anyone wearing clothing that covers the face in whole or in part in public spaces, so as to make the person unidentifiable and unrecognisable. Under the law, police can issue fines from €15–25, and women caught in public risk spending from one to seven days in prison. Luckily for local celebrators, this law will not apply during carnival time. (The first victim was a man disguised as a huge pencil asking people to vote for the Social Democrat party of Flanders in the run-up to the 13 June 2010 legislative elections.<sup>1</sup>)

The proposed law represents the culmination of a debate on Islam in Belgium that has focused largely on the issue of women, headscarves and burkas. Today, most Flemish cities have rules and regulations that prohibit women working within their administrations from wearing any type of head covering. Even most schools prohibit headscarves not only for teaching staff, but also for the students and pupils themselves. The Islamic headscarf has become what philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls the typifying content of Islam (i.e. the concept that makes the abstract and universal concept of Islam more concrete).<sup>2</sup> It is the level on which ideological battles are fought, won or lost. The lack of substance of the abstract universal term is thus translated into a concept or concepts that supposedly cover its social reality. This became very obvious when two declared atheists and a self-defined Judaeo-Christian agnostic described the Islamic headscarf, in a very well-publicised op-ed in one of the major Flemish newspapers, as ‘above all a tactical weapon of Muslims in their crusade against modernity’.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, the public discourse on Islam has been framed as a problem for the liberal political order, and the Muslim cast as a problem within the European body politic. The xeno-racism<sup>4</sup> that once focused on migration and targeted, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, immigrants, asylum seekers and foreigners has now been concentrated into the debate on Islam in general and the headscarf in particular. The so-called ‘problem of Islam in Europe’ has become an important ideological battlefield within Europe that is revealing the boundaries and limits of democracy.

This article sets out to investigate two interrelated themes. First, I will sketch the contours of the public debate on Islam as a specific ‘problem’ for politics as well as the way in which Muslims and Islam have gradually become framed as a threat to Belgium and, more specifically, to Flanders. I argue that this discourse is Islamophobic, as it essentialises Muslims in such a way as to reframe socioeconomic problems as cultural problems. Thus, political problems are diluted in a culturalist explanation that targets Muslims’ unsuitable cultural and religious background as the reason for economic exclusion and marginalisation. Thus, one needs to flesh out the culturalisation of societal problems against the background of the important political restructuring that started in the late 1980s (i.e. the project of neoliberal reform that introduced new techniques of government, dismantling the welfare state and its concomitant ideas on citizenship and political participation).<sup>5</sup>

Second, I will illustrate how Islam was and is being shaped politically by state agencies in search of a 'Muslim interlocutor' as well as how Muslims are trying to become spokesmen for Muslim constituencies and, thus, show how Islam and Muslims became the objects of political and bureaucratic intervention. The political shaping of Islam in Belgium refers to a set of government techniques that establish the institutional framework within which the 'Muslim community' becomes constituted.<sup>6</sup> While public and political debates throughout Europe frame the issue of the institutionalisation of Islam in terms of the abstract idiom of a separation of church and state, I focus instead on the political struggles and institutional articulations of the local Belgian context. To uncover the politics that underlie the construction of Islam and Muslims as a specific 'problem' means examining individual state projects. Only then can we fully uncover the politics of Islamophobia and devise efficient strategies of resistance to it (a theme that will not be addressed directly, as it is outside the scope of this paper). The salience of 'Islam' in different European countries and on the EU institutional level needs to be understood with reference to individual, country-specific contexts.<sup>7</sup> The case of Belgium is further complicated by the sometimes complex division of labour between federal and regional political agencies. Consecutive constitutional reforms have scattered some of the most important policy matters touching the lives of Muslims (as citizens as well as believers) over different areas (nation states, regions, communities), but have mostly created, since the 1980s, two distinct public spheres with different public debates.<sup>8</sup> This article focuses on the debate on Islam in Flanders, but takes into account those policies that are implemented nationally and thus have an impact on the region.

### **Integration and the culturalisation of problems**

Unlike the Netherlands where, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the murders of a popular-cum-populist politician (Pim Fortuyn) and an equally loved-and-loathed artist (Theo van Gogh), the Belgian debate on Islam and Muslims really took off a decade earlier with the electoral rise of the far-right party, the Flemish Block (Vlaams Blok, VB). The 24th November 1991, so-called 'black Sunday', the day that the VB jumped from two to twelve seats (i.e. from 1.9 per cent of the votes cast to 6.6 per cent), brought about a major political turnaround. Immigrants, Islam, Muslims, ghettos, asylum seekers, and so on moved centre stage in political concerns. As early as 1992, Islamophobic slogans were becoming quite normal in Flemish nationalist milieus. '*Turkse ratten, rol uw matten*' (Turkish rats, roll your mats) was regularly sung during far-right political meetings and rallies. The political discourse of the VB focused on a very strict Flemish nationalism combined with an overtly racist attitude towards all non-EU foreigners. The response from mainstream political parties and civil society to the rise of the VB was enormous.

Political Commissioner Paula D'hondt, head of the KCM (Koninklijk Commissariaat voor Migrantenbeleid, Royal Commission on Migration Policy) and author of the first major report on migration in 1989, told politicians that if

they had read her report and acted on it, then the VB would not have made such striking political inroads. In the alarm at its success, the general idea on integration, as elaborated by Miss D'hondt, was taken up as the basis for migration policies. Integration meant, first, that migrants had to assimilate where it was a matter of public order; second, migrants needed to be encouraged to fit in and adapt 'to certain social principles on which the indigenous (*'autochthon'*) majority seems to implicitly agree'; and, finally, immigrants needed to adapt at 'the level of the many cultural expressions so that they neither pose a threat to the public order nor to the social principles that the host country holds on to'.<sup>9</sup> While the report admitted that an integration policy necessitated a joint effort and the concerted action of different ministries and other public institutions in the fields of, for example, education, housing, employment, health, welfare, it was made obvious that the burden of the policy rested on immigrants' shoulders. While major political parties spoke of tolerance, pluralism, openness and even multiculturalism, it seemed that they all accepted the idea that society was best seen as a homogenous entity and that immigrants should dissolve into this homogeneity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, they tended to reinforce the idea that there was a gap between immigrants and the rest of society.

This idea of a gap became very visible from the late 1990s onwards, when integration policy officially shifted, at least for the Flemish part of the country, to a policy of *'inburgering'*: making citizens. What was more or less hidden in integration policy became very open under *inburgering*: 'immigrants' – whether newcomers or children born in Belgium after the immigration waves of the 1960s and 1970s – were not considered to be full citizens. They all had to go through an educational programme aimed at acquiring the language and necessary skills to live in 'our' society through the study of societal orientation, and guidance and counselling on the employment market.<sup>11</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, it was through the idioms of migrant or guest worker that immigration policy was crafted, while, from the second half of the 1990s onwards, it was the figure of the *'allochtoon'* (as opposed to the *autochthon* [indigene]) that needed integration. In policy terms, the *'allochtonen'* were defined as:

persons who are legally residing in Belgium, regardless of whether they have Belgian nationality and who, at the same time, meet the following conditions: at least one of their parents or grandparents was born outside of Belgium; they are in a disadvantaged position because of their ethnic origin or their weak socio-economic situation. This decree does not take into account nationality. The concept is connected to disadvantaged situations.<sup>12</sup>

While the definition itself correctly focused on socioeconomic disadvantage, the policies set in motion to tackle such disadvantage were much more geared towards a culturist definition of the situation, so that, by 2006, the term *allochtoon* remained merely a concept in public debate, while state agencies defined people with a minority ethnic background as targets for policy.<sup>13</sup>

With this came a much more narrow idea of integration that depicted the culture of immigrants (usually Islam) as the main obstacle to real integration.

During the first decade of this century, Flemish Liberal party minister of integration Marino Keulen described his policy as a: 'compelling invitation to everyone who legally resides in our society and who wishes to build his future to participate actively in society: to learn the language, to know society's basic values and principles and comply with them, and become independent as soon as possible'.<sup>14</sup> When asked what he meant by these basic values and principles, he added: 'I am talking about the equality between men and women, the right to freedom of expression, the separation between Church and State and the acceptance of the rule of law.'<sup>15</sup> The conventional wisdom is that a myth of social cohesion has to be promoted in order to bind the nation together, so that minorities can be persuaded to assimilate.<sup>16</sup>

The reference to the concept of citizenship defined in relation to the question of integration reflects the shifting and changing ideas on the organisation of society. With the shift from the welfare state to the active welfare state in the 1990s, the (up until this point) passive citizen (who was supposedly pampered by welfare policies) was bequeathed a new role, that of the active and responsible citizen. This revised concept of citizenship – officially applied to all Belgians – highlighted a politics of give and take, of mutual rights and obligations between citizen and government. The assumed reciprocity of that relationship would make for better and more active participation of citizens in public debates and politics. With the policy of *inburgering*, this type of social thought was applied to immigrants as well. But where the former were considered full citizens who needed to be improved, the latter were seen as needing to catch up.

The problem identified (first referred to as the problem of migration, later as the problem of Islam; see below) is apparently situated outside normal politics and the target group (*alloctonen*) outside the normal political context.<sup>17</sup> *Alloctonen*, even when they are official citizens and Belgian nationals, are not good enough as citizens, it seems, so are always prompted to become *ingeburgerd* to prove their ability to become good citizens. Thus, *alloctonen* are not (really) part of the body politic, which suggests the existence of some sort of 'cultural gap' between migrants and society.

The idea that culture and (especially over the last few years) Islam as a religion are the greatest obstacles in the emancipation of the *alloctonen* is a very strong one that has gained currency in numerous circles.<sup>18</sup> While the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown that Belgium is the penultimate country in Europe in terms of the employment of migrants, and while the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism has shown in its yearly reports since the 1990s that immigrants in general, but increasingly specifically Muslims, are systematically discriminated against in the housing sector and the employment market, it is still their unwillingness to adapt that is the reason given for their 'lagging behind'.<sup>19</sup>

The idea that culture lies at the core of societal problems has been meticulously analysed by the Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel.<sup>20</sup> 'Culturism', as he

names this explanation, starts from the notion that society is composed of people who all have a clear, stable and homogeneous (usually unilateral) set of cultural values and standards. Some people, though, do not have the 'better' or 'right' culture (human rights, equality between men and women, separation of church and state, and so on) and, thus, do not meet the standards of society. Culturalism reflects the limits and contradictions of liberal thought. Migration and integration are no longer seen as structural issues, but are individualised. 'They' are individuals who are integrated or not; 'they' are individuals who are to blame and carry the responsibility if 'they' encounter problems with integration. Through the constant criticism, even derision, satire and mockery of 'their' culture and religion (the backwardness of Islam), 'they' have to gain other insights. The contradiction resides in the fact that the liberal analyses of 'their' lack of integration are attributed to a structural feature ('their' culture or Islam), but their success is attributable to a personal, individual trajectory of self-development. This explains why liberal movements and parties are so infatuated with international and national ex-Muslims who flaunt their personal success stories as a coming to terms with Islam. Whenever Muslims, and especially Muslim women, tend to favour group-based emancipation, this is, in the best case, seen as a naive form of self-delusion or, in the worst, as a communitarian withdrawal from society. This type of thinking has become a central ingredient of the debate on Islam, as we shall examine further. First, we turn our attention to the ways in which Belgium has tried to shape the form of Islam.

### **The state and the political shaping of Islam**

As migrants, guest workers and Turks and Moroccans gradually all became referred to as 'Muslim',<sup>21</sup> throughout the 1990s, the call for an official body representing Muslims became louder and louder. This debate is certainly not new and reflects the specific way in which Belgium organises the religious field.

The historical tensions and struggles between church and state in Belgium ended in an original *modus vivendi* that is, for example, quite different from the French *laïcité*. There is no strict separation between church and state, as the law of 1870 introduced a distinction between the temporal (profane) and the spiritual aspects of worship. While the state must refrain from any doctrinal or spiritual interference, religions that are constitutionally recognised can appeal for state funding for the secular aspects of their rites. Since Islam was recognised as early as 1974 by the Belgian legislature, in addition to five other faiths (Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox and Anglican churches as well as Judaism) and the humanist tradition, the Islamic religion has henceforth also been eligible for support. However, a problem arose in that Islam did not have an established clergy or hierarchical body that could represent Muslims and distribute the subsidies. Until 1998, the year in which elections to a Muslim representative body were held for the first time, the issue of the organisation of Islam was thus stranded in debates about the form and content of this representative body.<sup>22</sup>

Since 1974, the Belgian government has held fast to the idea that one body should represent all Muslims in Belgium. The question of how this could be organised has been the central element and bone of contention in the negotiations and debates over recent decades. Although the idea of elections was raised at an early stage, it was still not until the end of the 1990s that the first election was actually organised. The wait-and-see attitude of the government was prompted by several factors. First and foremost, banal political considerations played a role, as several politicians simply lacked the political will to tackle the issue. The steady growth of an extreme rightwing political movement in Flanders meant that some politicians did not regard it as opportune to do anything about Islam. In addition, it had become clear that the government had long seen Islam as something foreign and, therefore, as part of foreign policy. The influence of the Moroccan and Turkish embassies continually hampered the creation of a Belgian Muslim dynamic. Muslims, in all their diversity, agreed that elections were the best way of achieving representation, but they (rightly) posed the question as to what should form the basis of that representation. For the first elections on 13 December 1998, the government opted for an ethnic representation based on categories of national origin. Regardless of nationality, candidates (or voters) had to be part of one of the four established electoral categories (Turks, Moroccans, other nationalities, converts). In recent years, several organisations and individuals have challenged this arrangement: why not allow Muslims to vote on the basis of their religious school (Malikites, Hanafites, and so on)? Why not have lists of Muslim candidates (regardless of nationality or origin) grouped around common programmes?

Sixty-eight per cent of the 70,000 registered voters cast their votes during the 1998 elections.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning, a number of problems emerged. Some politicians felt that the elected body was a 'hotbed of fundamentalists and radicals'. Amid a complete lack of transparency, those elected to the council and the proposed candidates for the Belgian Muslims' Executive (EMB) were 'screened' without any clear legislative framework (and without a genuine possibility of checks and balances being exercised by parliament and/or the courts). Several individuals were barred from sitting on the EMB. Rumours circulated that 'Islamists' had taken command of 'Belgian Islam' or 'were hiding in the shadow of the unsuspecting elected members'.

Within the EMB, there was barely any consensus between the different religious communities and this led to complete inertia and stagnation in relation to all the issues that the executive was intended to address. The institutionalisation of Islam proved to relate primarily to Moroccan, French-speaking Muslims from Brussels.

It would be too easy to ascribe the failures of the EMB solely to its members. The political authorities, through the atmosphere of suspicion they helped to create, forced the EMB to drift into an impasse. Moreover, yet another round of state reform had fragmented and spread political powers with regard to faiths between the Belgian, Flemish, provincial and municipal levels, so that no one knew any longer how to bring issues, such as recognising a mosque for example, to a satisfactory conclusion.

Following the installation of a temporary transitional executive in July 2003, new elections were organised in March 2005 in a bid to break the stalemate. Around 69,500 Muslims registered to vote, of whom 63 per cent (43,765 persons) actually did so. The results once again caused some commotion. It turned out that, this time, it was primarily Muslims of Turkish origin who had voted (winning forty of the sixty-eight seats on the council). The outcome of the elections was not an unmitigated success for the government. The fact that part of the Moroccan community stayed away from the ballot box again rekindled the issue of representativeness. In addition, the financial scandals that broke out in 2007 further delegitimised the body.

Why does the Belgian government impose a requirement on Muslims that they must designate representative leaders for the organisation of their religion? No one has ever asked whether the Catholic Church is representative of all Belgian Catholics. In the context of the separation of church and state, there is also a question to be answered about the limits of intervention by the government in the organisation of a religion; after all, government has no power to intervene in the internal organisation of the church, nor in the appointment of its representatives or its theology. So why is this requirement of representativeness being imposed on Muslims? Even if we assume that some policy-makers sincerely believe in the utility of a representative body (in the sense that a non-representative head of a religion is not an ideal discussion partner), this still raises questions about the function of this body.

The search for the representativeness of the Muslim interlocutor is the result of a double-bind process. On the one hand, Muslims thought that representativeness would at least contain Muslim differences of origin (mainly Turkey and Morocco) or of creed (Sunni hanafi, Sunni maliki, Sufi, and so on), while the state, on the other hand, hoped for more than just an official body dealing with the temporal aspects of Islam (for example, the building of mosques and the paying of imams). Indeed, the culturalisation of societal problems and challenges that had made Islam and Muslims visible in a particular way throughout the 1990s led to a growing belief that such a representative institution would solve the problems of Islam in Belgium.

Since the 1990s, the idea had grown, particularly in Flanders, that this body would solve the problems associated with integration while, constitutionally, it was only allowed to deal with the temporal aspects of the faith. Muslims, but above all indigenous politicians, saw the EMB not only as a vehicle for the organisation of the religion, but also assigned it a broader political and social role. Resistance to this came mainly from non-practising Muslims; they felt that the problems of integration demanded a powerful political policy rather than an ethno-religious remedy. Secular, non-Muslim politicians from several parties concurred with this, but still hoped that non-practising Muslims would also stand as candidates in elections. This desire was translated into the demand by the government that the executive include a number of young people and women. Muslims responded that the government, given the separation of church and state, should not meddle in the internal organisation of the body.

Several Muslims asked: Are there women or young people in the Catholic church who are represented by the Council of Bishops and Cardinals?’

### **From integration to Islam and the politics of Islamophobia**

The problematisation of Islam started well before 9/11, but has grown exponentially since the turn of the century, when a belief in the failure of multiculturalism started to gain wider currency. In fact, for Flanders, the symbolic line of fracture was the publication of a short op-ed in 2000 by the Dutch professor of urban studies, Paul Scheffer, entitled ‘The multicultural drama’.<sup>24</sup> While the VB spearheaded the attack on multiculturalism in the 1990s in an unabashedly racist and Islamophobic way, Paul Scheffer’s op-ed accentuated and helped to make sense of the question of Islam in Europe to a much larger public. In a way, this normalised and sanitised a discourse that had hitherto been a hallmark of far-right politicians and parties.

Islam suddenly became part of a media frenzy. Television, radio, press and internet forums became deluged with things Islamic, from well-meant special editions trying to prevent stories that were circulating about, say, an imam who did not want to shake hands with a city councillor, or a man who wanted his wife treated by a female doctor, turning into questions of national policy, to full-scale attacks on Islam and Muslims. Thus, these issues took hold in popular culture. The more sensational the news on Islam, the better it sold.

In Flanders, the screening of a popular documentary series by Jan Leyers, former frontman and singer in the now defunct pop group Soulsister, literally made Islam the talk of the town for weeks. *The Road to Mecca* became one of the most successful travel documentaries ever broadcast in Flanders, and the subsequent book headed the literary bestseller list for months. Having studied philosophy for four years back in the 1970s, the 52-year-old singer had enough credentials to become an expert on Islam. His jump-on-jump-off plane trips qualified him as a local specialist, as an eyewitness or, as the trailer for the series summarised:

From land to land Leyers looks for answers, searching for the back of the Muslims’ tongue. How’s life really with Muslims from Morocco to Saudi Arabia? How do they think and feel, how do they live, how is it for Muslims, how do they look at the West and their own Islam? Jan penetrates deeper and deeper into the heart of Islam and Muslims, towards Mecca, where it all started.

In the post 9/11 era, several opinion formers discovered Islam and quickly became advocates of the Huntingtonian ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis. Mia Doornaert,<sup>25</sup> senior journalist at *De Standaard* and currently special independent advisor to Prime Minister Yves Leterme, has been especially vocal in advocating the idea of a clash of civilisations. The idea of such a ‘clash’, and how you can measure one ‘civilisation’ against another, appeared to be a potent way of

reframing domestic social problems, linked to migration, as a cultural war between different worldviews.

The gradual political mobilisation of second- and third-generation immigrants in Belgium coincided with the rise of the VB. Distrust and suspicion of migrant organisations, whether secular or religious, were prevalent throughout the 1990s, but the emergence of the Arab European League (AEL), led by its charismatic leader Dyab Abu Jahjah, epitomised, as nothing else had, the changing public discourse in Flanders on integration. The AEL, with its confrontational position on issues of exclusion and self-defence patrols and its unique capacity to mobilise large parts of (the mainly Moroccan) 'immigrant' youth who claimed pan-Arabic and Islamic identity, came to prominence after the racist murder of a teacher of Moroccan origin in 2003. (This was officially described as the lone act of a psychologically unstable person so as to rule out the possibility of attributing it to racism.) The reaction of the political establishment, echoing the Flemish public debate, was vicious and punitive: the movement was criminalised, its leader jailed and charged with numerous indictments (though Abu Jahjah was eventually acquitted on all accounts) and the movement threatened with being outlawed. It was obvious that the Belgian, but especially the Flemish, establishment saw the growth of a radical immigrant movement with its own ideas about integration reflected in the concepts of Arab Europeans, Muslim identity and Arab pride – inspired by Malcolm X's ideas – as threatening. What should have been seen as a good example of integration, a well-organised group democratically demanding members' rights within a participatory public sphere, was thus criminalised and depicted as proof of the failure of integration.

But the real failure of integration can, in reality, best be seen in the problems that migrants encounter in the job and housing markets. Discrimination and economic marginalisation are a day-to-day reality for most immigrant communities and especially for Moroccans. A study initiated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1998 showed that applications from 'natives' and from Belgians of Moroccan origin were treated differently during the recruitment process. The survey clearly showed that the acceptance of candidates was neither due to the economic situation of the companies, nor the level of training of candidates, but to their ethnicity.<sup>26</sup> This study has in fact been corroborated throughout the decade by other agencies.<sup>27</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that non-EU immigrants have a far higher degree of unemployment than average. In Flanders, the unemployment rate for non-EU immigrants is 28 per cent, while it is 12.8 per cent for EU citizens and 5.2 per cent for Belgian nationals.<sup>28</sup>

Gradually, but forcefully, the idea of a failure of integration – presumably caused by Islam's rejection of, or resistance to, modernity – emerged. The idea of a failure of integration and multiculturalism is now widespread across the political spectrum and is popular with opinion leaders and other intellectuals. But what, besides a certain feeling of malaise, was (or is) the proof of failure? The proponents of this thesis share the conviction that the root causes of specific

societal problems are to be found in the cultural permissiveness and naive cultural relativism that lay at the heart of Belgium's multicultural policy and that this is what made Islam thrive. All those not able to accept this view were targeted for attack as naive multiculturalists, at best, and European apologists preparing for dhimmitude,<sup>29</sup> at worst. The failure to see the problems of contemporary society as the consequence of Islam is seen as an otherworldly attitude that does not deserve serious rebuttal, but only derision. This apparent self-evident diagnosis of multiculturalism lies at the heart of what Dutch sociologist Baukje Prins<sup>30</sup> has called a 'new realism'.

This new realism is mostly promoted by white middle-aged men (and a few women), who define themselves as courageous for daring to speak the truth in the face of a politically correct elite that is denying the facts. The new realists claim to speak on behalf of the 'common people' against the arrogance of the elite that doesn't take the complaints of the people seriously enough. The new realists go on to suggest that it is typically Dutch (and we can extend this to Belgian or Flemish) to emphasise honesty and open-mindedness. They are convinced that many problems are caused because a corrupt Leftist clique, having the wrong views on racism and intolerance, is censoring public debate and free speech. Finally, the new realists see themselves as emancipators of women in general and Muslim women in particular. The conviction that one should speak out in the face of a politically correct elite opened the door for what some have labelled a debate on Islam, but which was actually a series of monologues by white middle-aged men insulting and deriding Islam and Muslims.

In 2006, for example, after a young schoolboy from Brussels, Joe van Holsbeek, was murdered in Brussels Central Station for his mp3 player, Paul Beliën, a far-right Catholic conservative with good connections in neoconservative Washington and today advisor to Dutch politician Geert Wilders, was able to publish his op-ed, 'Give us arms', in one of the quality Flemish newspapers (*De Standaard*, 21 April 2006) as well as explain his views on national television. In his op-ed, Beliën suggested that: 'Muslims are predators that have learned from childhood ... during the yearly feast of the sacrifice ... how to slaughter warm herd animals.'<sup>31</sup> It was obvious what the call for arms was about. In Beliën's account, the Muslim is dehumanised through the animalisation of his deeds. While Beliën went furthest in such discourse, he was definitely not the only one.<sup>32</sup>

Jean-Marie Dedecker, a popular and populist politician, responded by declaring that the murder was, 'a deficit of civilisation as the consequence of a policy of tolerance that got out of hand'.<sup>33</sup> Everywhere, politicians and citizens alike asked imams and Muslim community leaders to hand over the criminals. The imam of the central mosque of Brussels was more or less obliged (or felt morally compelled) to include this call for the delivery of the perpetrators in his Friday sermon. But when it suddenly emerged that the murderers were not North Africans, as suggested, and not even Muslims, but Polish, both the media and politicians lamented, for a brief moment, their prejudices. The *mea culpa* lasted

for a couple of hours, after which it was established that the murderers were not any kind of Pole either, but Roma!<sup>34</sup>

This constant dehumanisation of Muslims – relentlessly depicted as brainless automatons responding in uniform fashion to the call of their monolithic faith – is today a very acceptable way of entering the debate.<sup>35</sup> By the end of 2008, and especially with Israel's Cast Lead operation in Gaza (December 2008 – January 2009), blatant Islamophobia increased yet further. For years, Muslims were confronted with sharp, harsh and intimidating commentaries and, when some of them did not want to respond to this amalgam of allegations or responded in an unanticipated way, they would invariably get an outraged 'hey, I just wanted to get into a discussion' as a response, as if one goes to a cafe, slaps someone in the face and then yells, 'hey, I just wanted to get to know you' when that person does not respond in the expected way.

It is not the truth or nuanced arguments that were (and are) important in the debate on Islam; on the contrary, it is purity and authenticity that are to be applauded. The purity of the speaker should in and of itself be sufficient to convince the audience of his or her virtue. Resentment, indignation and a misguided form of morality have taken hold of the debate. Ian Buruma aptly posited that 'aggressiveness is seen as a sign of genuineness and the showing of anger a proof of moral integrity'.<sup>36</sup> Rather than a rational set of arguments, what is needed to be publicly taken seriously is an angry and self-righteous tone that is addressed not so much against Muslims themselves, but more frequently against the political Left.

In the summer of 2008, the debate on Islam took a new turn. In an op-ed in the daily *De Standaard*, the writers Geert van Istendael and Benno Barnard published a 'Notice to the right-minded Left'.<sup>37</sup> In it, they warned Leftist intellectuals of their naivety and utter incompetence when it came to Islam. Luckily for the readers, the writers suggested that they knew what the essence or substance of Islam was: 'Islam has a completely different view of religious and political reality than Judaism and Christianity, the religions on which the Prophet based himself and that, in his Koran, he has fought by fire and sword.' The God of Abraham and Christ are subject to justice, they argue, while Allah is elevated above it, so that Muslims can't have free will like Jews and Christians. Besides, they continue, Islamofascism is not a hollow expression of the extreme Right or of apostate Leftists. Modern Islam is deeply conditioned by Nazism, via the Egyptian Brotherhood. This movement has been directly influenced in the 1930s by *Mein Kampf* and is itself the inspiration for al-Qaida, Hamas and other 'convivial' associations.

Wim van Rooy, author of the bestseller *The Malaise of Multiculturalism*,<sup>38</sup> an inflammatory book written in the best new realist tradition and a relentless invective against anyone who does not want to see reality, writes in an op-ed on Islamophobia: 'Muslims are people like non-Muslims, but they are conditioned to hostility towards non-Muslims by the ideology that Mohammed captures in the Qu'ran' (*Der Standaard*, 29 January 2009). The only logical conclusion of this

premise (which van Rooy himself, of course, refrains from writing) is that, sooner or later, all Muslims have the potential to become hostile towards non-Muslims. The evidence put forward for such a striking generalisation is largely anecdotal, based on dubious historical material and on half truths that serve very strong, political domestic and foreign policy agendas.<sup>39</sup>

A new *Kulturkampf* has taken shape in Belgium just as in other parts of the world. Arun Kundnani rightly argues that the neoconservative discourse on the inherent backwardness of Islam and its tendency to violence and radicalism has been gradually replaced by a liberal discourse on the totalitarian aspects of Islamism.<sup>40</sup> The debate on the inherently cruel nature of Islam has shifted to a focus on Islamism as a totalitarian ideology, an Islamic version of Nazism or fascism, as epitomised in the success of the concept of Islamofascism. But this change in discourses does not always amount to a rigid distinction. More often than not, and especially in the Belgian context, the two discourses are conflated as they are structurally linked to one another. The conservative idea, stressing the Judaeo-Christian roots of Europe, can, remarkably, be juxtaposed with the more liberal and progressive belief of the Enlightenment as the basis of modern Europe. Especially in Flanders, a growing public discourse describing Judaeo-Christian civilisation as the only possible cradle of modern secularism has gained momentum, as several publicly avowed atheists or agnostics now describe themselves as Christians by culture or ascribe their secularity to Christianity. In this amalgam of discourses, based on a very selective re-reading of history, Islam is being pitted as a major threat to this specifically Judaeo-Christian secular Europe.<sup>41</sup> It looks as if Europe is today amidst the creation of a new myth celebrating the genealogy of its rational and individualistic culture as an exception in the history of mankind, and treating Islam as a pariah in the history of religions, just as Europe and the West did so well in the past with Judaism.<sup>42</sup> Almost daily warnings of the imminent Islamisation of Europe and its transformation into Eurabia offer an indication of a growing obsession with Islam.<sup>43</sup>

The tone of the debate became so insulting that, by autumn 2009, some influential editorialists started to call for moderation, compromise and nuance. The diagnosis was that the warring parties should stop insulting each other, that there was a place for discussion and that bridges of compromise should be built. In an essay, Yves Desmet, editor-in-chief of the major newspaper *De Morgen* (14 November 2009), somewhat paradoxically called for a revolt of the moderates, while, a day earlier, the influential writer and editorialist Tom Naegels regretted that the water was still too deep between the new multiculturalists and the prophets of doom warning about the coming Islamisation of Europe.

But is the debate on Islam really between the agents of fear warning about its dangers and those who invoke a sense of victimhood that ends up explaining away any misconduct by Muslims? Is the answer to the stalemate to be found in a little of this and a little of that? The debate on Islam is not divided between a camp critical of Islam and another one that loves it. Rather, it is structured around two different and competing worldviews. The fault line is between two

opposing visions of man and society. One vision starts from a deterministic *pen-sée unique* that sees Islam as the explanation for both social problems close to home (unemployment, crime, etc.) and the dynamic of conflicts on the other side of the Mediterranean (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.). The other worldview states that political, economic and social structures, as well as the balance of power within which cultural identities are produced, are better grounds for explanations. Obviously, this does not mean that the latter would condone or tolerate the reprehensible behaviour of Muslims and foreigners.

## Conclusions

Muslims, as we have seen, are put on the defensive as they are defined in a public debate in which they are only marginally participating. Muslims have been represented as a distinct and homogeneous community that can be separated from a broader public. The problems they confront have been reframed as inherent deficiencies within their own community, tied to Islam. Islam itself has been portrayed as external to European society and its values. This representation of Islam as something foreign to Europe, an external threat to distinctly European norms and societies, coupled with a highly tendentious and reductionist representation of Islam in European public life, have together normalised Islamophobic attitudes.

The difficulties associated with the debate on Islam in the Belgian setting have little to do with dogmas, doctrines or the theology of Islam, but are the result of different expectations. The management of Islam is still characterised by a focus on integration amidst a growing feeling of fear and Islamophobic prejudice. Political parties and even civil society organisations demand the withdrawal of the constitutional recognition of Islam, which is now the second biggest religion in the country. Between the tendency to control Muslim communities and their own push for empowerment through institutional recognition lies a field of heated political debate on the place and role of religion in a secularised democratic order, a debate that will inevitably run on for many years to come.

## References

- 1 As a law already exists that makes it compulsory to be 'recognisable' in public spaces, the police thought it wise to caution the pencil man.
- 2 Slavoj Žižek, 'Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism', *New Left Review* (no. 225), pp. 28–51, esp. p. 29.
- 3 Benno Barnard, Johan Sanctorum and Wim van Rooy, 'Zomaar een lapje stof? De hoofdhoek als wapen tegen de moderniteit', *De Standaard* (10 September 2009).
- 4 Liz Fekete, 'Anti-Muslim racism and the European security state', *Race & Class* (Vol. 46, no. 1, 2004), pp. 3–29; also Fekete, 'The emergence of xeno-racism', *Race & Class* (Vol. 43, no. 2, 2001), pp. 23–40.
- 5 To be complete, I should add that the transformation of the Belgian welfare state is synchronic with the rising success of nationalism in Flanders (whether in its party political or public form). In this article, I will not focus specifically on the differences between Flanders and Wallonia on the issue of Islam.

- 6 There are no official figures on the exact number of Muslims in Belgium because a person's religion cannot officially be registered. Based on approximate figures from the Belgian National Institute for Statistics (Nationaal Instituut voor Statistiek) and the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen), the number of Muslims is estimated at 416,000, equivalent to 4 per cent of the Belgian population. The biggest group of Muslims (roughly 200,000 people) is of Moroccan origin, followed by around 100,000 Muslims of Turkish origin. The remaining 100,000 originate from countries such as Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, Tunisia, the Balkans, and so on, but also includes converts. In addition to this 'ethnic' division, there is also a degree of religious diversity reflecting the different Islamic law schools ('*Madhabs*'), Sufi brotherhoods and sects. There are also a large number of Muslims who practise very little, if at all, and who define themselves as 'cultural Muslims'. Roughly 40 per cent of the Muslims in Belgium live in the Brussels agglomeration (16.5 per cent of the population of the capital). The remaining 60 per cent are distributed throughout Wallonia and Flanders. The 162,000 Muslims in Flanders represent 3 per cent of the Flemish population, the same percentage as the 94,000 Muslims living in Wallonia. The Maghrebi community tends to live in French-speaking Belgium, with almost half of them (47 per cent) living in the Brussels agglomeration. Fifty per cent of Turkish immigrants live in Flanders (the province of Limburg and the cities of Antwerp and Ghent), while the other half are evenly distributed between Wallonia and Brussels.
- 7 From this follows the proposition that the framing of Islam as a threat to the European separation of church and state serves to ground such an identity for Europe. As such, this discourse obscures more than it reveals, as it is the vehicle with which to construct specific ideological representations depending on political preferences (Judaean-Christian Europe, Catholic Europe, secular Europe, and so on).
- 8 This does not mean that the two public debates are completely separated. Links, dialogues and overlap exist, but, by and large, the issues of immigration, asylum, integration and Islam are couched in different terms on both sides of the linguistic barrier. In fact, since the Belgian institutional crisis of 2007, culminating today in the inability to form a national government, the issues of migration, integration and asylum constitute a clear fault line between the two linguistic communities.
- 9 Koninklijk Commissariaat voor het Migrantenbeleid, *Integratie(beleid): een werk van lange adem* (KCM/Inbel, Brussels, 1998).
- 10 The concept of integration comes from biology. It refers to the process of dissolving (for example, sugar in coffee). Jan Blommaert and Jef Verschuere were the first to analyse the internal incoherence of integration policies in their seminal volume *Het Belgische migrantendebat. De pragmatiek van de abnormalisering* (The Belgian debate on migrants: the pragmatics of abnormalisation (Antwerpen, International Pragmatics Association, 1992)).
- 11 Societal orientation encompassed classes on how to behave in the streets, how to look for traffic signs, where to buy garbage bags and how to use them, what administrations dealt with questions of nationality or unemployment, and so on.
- 12 'Decreet inzake het Vlaamse beleid ten aanzien van etnisch-culturele minderheden' (28 April 1998).
- 13 For a more in-depth analysis of the shift from integration to *inburgering* from a discourse analysis perspective, see Ico Maly, *Cultu(u)renpolitiek* (Antwerpen, Garant, 2007).
- 14 In an interview with *Gazet van Antwerpen*, the original Dutch reads: 'De dwingende uitnodiging aan iedereen die in onze Samenleving wettelijk verblijft en er zijn toekomst wil uitbouwen om actief deel te nemen aan de samenleving, de taal te leren, de basiswaarden ervan te kennen en na te leven en zo snel mogelijk op eigen benen te kunnen staan' (10 December 2005).
- 15 In an interview with *Het Nieuwsblad*, the original Dutch reads: 'Ik heb het dan over de gelijkheid tussen man en vrouw, het recht op vrije meningsuiting, de scheiding tussen Kerk en Staat, het accepteren van de regels van de rechtstaat' (27 December 2004).

- 16 As Belgium as a nation is struggling with its own identity, the liberal account of shared values and norms was effectively countered by a renewal of Flemish nationalism, as epitomised by Bart de Wever's Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (NV-A) landslide victory in the June 2010 elections.
- 17 This follows from the logic of *inburgering* itself. While the policy of *inburgering* was geared predominantly towards newcomers, citizens with a migration background can also apply for it. In public debates, however, it is very common to stretch this and to ask youngsters who are third- or fourth-generation 'immigrants' to become full citizens.
- 18 Even a quick and succinct scrutiny of Belgian newspapers in the 2000s would give hundreds of quotes from politicians of all parties that suggest that 'their culture' or 'Islam' is the only obstacle to 'their' integration.
- 19 In 1993, the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism was created by royal decree to 'promote equality of opportunity and to combat all forms of discrimination, exclusion, restriction or preferential treatment based on: so-called race, skin colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, marital status, birth, wealth, age, religion or ideology, present or future state of health, disability or physical characteristics', available at: <http://www.diversiteit.be/?setLanguage=3>.
- 20 Willem Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie. Aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij* (Kampen, Klement, 2007).
- 21 It has to be said that this was as much the work of the host society labelling migrants as Muslim as it was the work of certain Muslims trying to become the new spokesmen for their communities.
- 22 For a more in-depth and detailed account of the institutionalisation of Islam in Belgium, see Meryem Kanmaz and Sami Zemni, 'Moslims als inzet in religieuze, maatschappelijke en veiligheidsdiscours: de erkenning en institutionalisering van de islamitische eredienst in België', in Els Vanderwaeren and Christiane Timmerman, eds, *Diversiteit in islam. Over verschillende belevingen van het moslim zijn* (Leuven/Voorburg, Acco, 2008), pp. 109–56.
- 23 The conditions for eligibility were: having attained a minimum age of 25; having lived a minimum of five years in Belgium; speaking one of the national languages; being in possession of a diploma of secondary education; having no political and/or diplomatic mandates; and, signing a declaration of loyalty to the Belgian Kingdom. 'J'affirme sur l'honneur adhérer à la religion islamique, en respecter les prescriptions et les enseignements de fraternité, de tolérance et de probité, et m'engager à agir dans le cadre de mes fonctions dans l'intérêt exclusif du culte et cela dans le respect de la Constitution du Royaume, des Lois et des Institutions du peuple belge' (Panafit, 1999), p. 221.
- 24 First published in the Dutch newspaper *NRC* on 29 January 2000, the op-ed was reproduced in numerous other publications, journals and magazines.
- 25 For instance, between January and April 2009, Mia Doornaert wrote on 'Clashing civilizations' (3 January), 'The shock of civilization' (12 March), 'Clashing civilizations' (part 2; 12 March) and 'Clash of cultures' (6 April).
- 26 See: <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/download/imp/imp23e.pdf>.
- 27 The CGKR published a 66-page document on discrimination in the job market after it had established that names play an important role as to whether a candidate gets invited for a job interview or not. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) also established how political xenophobia and Islamophobia are leading to concrete forms of discrimination on the job market: see: <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Belgium/BEL-CbC-III-2004-1-NLD.pdf>.
- 28 See: [http://vdab.be/trends/kik/doc/KiK\\_Allochtonen200903.pdf](http://vdab.be/trends/kik/doc/KiK_Allochtonen200903.pdf).
- 29 In classic Islamic jurisprudence, '*dhimmi*' refers to the status given to the 'people of the Book'. By paying a tax ('*jaziya*'), they were considered 'protected' groups.
- 30 Baukje Prins, *Voorbij de onschuld: het debat over integratie in Nederland* (Amsterdam, van Genneep, 2004), pp. 34–6.

- 31 Paul Beliën, 'Geef ons wapens' (Give us arms), available at: [www.brusseljournal.com](http://www.brusseljournal.com) (21 April 2006). This op-ed has been taken offline on all Belgian websites after an official complaint to the CGKR.
- 32 It was only after a couple of days that official complaints ensued, so that the op-ed had to be withdrawn from the numerous websites on which it was posted. Mr Beliën himself is trying his utmost to erase all traces of his op-ed, not so much because he has changed his ideas, but because he understood that he had made a 'tactical' error in his ideological struggle.
- 33 J. -M. Dedecker, 'Het failliet van een crimineel gedoogbeleid', *De Standaard* (19 April 2006).
- 34 The cultural diagnosis of Roma culture as an explanation for the murder was as biased and prejudiced as the debate on Islam, of course, and suffused with unabashed racism.
- 35 See, from a political economic perspective, Sami Zemni, *Het islamdebat* (Berchem, EPO, 2009); and, from a discourse analysis perspective, Ico Maly, *De Beschavingsmachine. Wij en de islam* (Berchem, EPO, 2009).
- 36 Ian Buruma, *Moord in Amsterdam. De moord op Theo van Gogh en de grenzen van tolerantie* (Amsterdam, Olympus, 2006), p. 28.
- 37 Benno Barnard and Geert van Istendael, 'Bericht aan weldenkend links', *De Standaard* (2 August 2008).
- 38 Wim van Rooij, *De malaise van de multiculturaliteit* (Leuven, Acco, 2008).
- 39 It is not a coincidence that much of the 'factual' material is dependent on translations provided by the highly propagandist MEMRI website.
- 40 Arun Kundnani, 'Islamism and the roots of liberal rage', *Race & Class* (Vol. 50, no. 2, 2008), pp. 40-67.
- 41 It has to be said that this does not translate automatically into a specific political position on issues of diplomacy and international relations towards the Arab and/or Islamic world. In Flanders, for example, liberals tend to be opposed to the war in Iraq, but are very strong supporters of Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.
- 42 See, for a more elaborate account, George Corm, *Orient-Occident: la fracture imaginaire* (Paris, Editions la Découverte, 2002, 2004).
- 43 The obsession with Islam seems to be a fertile ground for synchronically attacking the so-called betrayal of the political Left as well as being the stepping stone to reformulate a Left politics in post-cold war Europe. For example, in France, Bernard Henr-Lévy and, in Holland, Carl Brendel have not much more to offer to a refounding of the Left than a declaration of war on Islam/ism and support for Israel.