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ISLAM UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF MODERNITY

Abstract: The article proposes a possible methodological perspective for conceptualizing Islam and modernity in the context of the dichotomy “traditional vs. modern”. The author outlines the different images of Islam in their specific sociological profiles as related to (and stemming from) the canon of norms that constitute the Islamic community and construct community ties, the basic resource of which are religious values. A scrutiny of the modes of difference and otherness through the lense of neighbourhood reveals otherness to be a latent conflict factor susceptible to political mobilization and populist manipulation. The author identifies the problem fields that generate the clash between secularism and Islam.

Keywords: modernity, Islam, identity, community, neighbourhood

1. Brief grounding of the need for knowledge on religious difference and religious otherness

The traditional scale of sociological analysis treating of the relations between secular and religious, between the sacred and the profane, is no longer sufficient for interpreting the similarities in meaning or the essential differences between the democratic norms on one hand and the revived religious practices in the Muslim environment on the other. In interpretations of the on-going processes in the Islamic life-world, there prevails a schematic understanding of Islam, which views this religion as opposed to the very notion of democracy, civil rights, and personal liberties. The leading schema of interpretation in this case has acquired the form of the following syllogism:

Every form of Islam is a fundamentalism;

Every fundamentalism is terrorism;

Therefore, every form of Islam is terrorism.

But reality actually offers many reasons for rethinking such a schema of interpretation. Religious values, as general representations and as a picture of the world, influence not only the individual attitudes and behaviour but also the degree of tolerance and social solidarity between different ethnic-religious communities. Against the backdrop of the new fundamentalisms and the accelerated social transformations brought about by the so-called second modernity that characterizes the risk society, the problem of values becomes increasingly topical in a sociological and philosophical aspect. The integrative and disintegrative functions of values and their instrumentalization may lead either to the consolidation or to the breakdown of social ties; so knowledge of these functions is crucial as a possible remedy for the kind of active ignorance that involves suppression of, or disregard for, the real problems that exist.

Some basic questions need to be answered:

- How do the representations of Muslims encompass simultaneously the image of the citizen on one hand and, on the other, the Islamic religious identity formed under the conditions of a new horizon (the global media and the intensified religious consciousness leading the faithful to ever-deeper layers of their religiosity) that draws the local community into a unified Ummah?
- Is it possible to correlate religious freedom and freedom in a democratic society; in other words, to juxtapose freedom as a personal, political, and economic choice and freedom in the religious sense?
- Is there an area of shared interpretations and moral norms that mediates between the democratic vs. the religious principles in the Muslim environment?
- Is an Islamic modernity possible, and if so, how would it be related to the democratic values of an essentially secular political system?

2. A possible methodological horizon

2.1 Traditional and modern

In a methodological aspect, the analysis of Islam under conditions of modernity may be situated in the context of the dichotomy “traditional vs. modern”. The two sides of this dichotomy should be taken as ideal types in the Weberian sense. Ideal types are instruments for achieving the tasks of the social sciences. Attempts had been made to use ideal types even before Max Weber, but without methodological awareness, so that confusion occurs between

ideal types and the laws of historical generalization. Weber's ideal types are not coloured by value judgments and are not related to "perfection", except in terms of logical perfection. They are not generic concepts, i.e., they are not a set of traits that pertain to all the objects belonging to a certain class. Nor are they statistical averages. They are not the constant essence of things, which is gradually discovered in the course of investigation. *The ideal type is an instrument constructed by the researcher in order to structure the in-itself amorphous reality and to thereby make possible the understanding of that reality.* In its conceptual purity, the ideal type is not to be found in empirical reality. The elements of the ideal type are empirical in origin, but they are stylized, and their assembly into a unified mental picture represents a completely artificial construction. The closer the investigated reality comes to the ideal type, the more it lends itself to comprehension according to the chosen viewpoint. If a given ideal type proves to be of no heuristic value and does not enable an interpretative understanding of empirical reality, for the purpose of which it was mentally constructed, it should be discarded and another ideal type should be constructed in its place, which should be tested in turn by means of empirical study. Ideal types are neither "true" nor "false". They are only an intellectual game, the purpose of which is to attain knowledge of concrete cultural phenomena and their structure, their determining conditions and their meaning (Weber, 1968).

2.2. Historical and/or sociological knowledge about Islam

The transition from historical facts to history, especially when this history is defined as "official", national, generally valid, and self-defining as regards the dimensions of its significance, is an ideological transition. Strict sociological analysis should try to restrict itself and should draw methodological distinctions that would make it possible to control the effects of this ideological perspective. This would be possible by assuming the thesis that there are multiple facts that cannot be arranged in hierarchic order of significance and/or truthfulness, especially considering that there are no such things as facts in themselves – with regard to its meaning, each fact forms a unity with the acting subject.

A considerable part of the scientific and publicist literature devoted to ethnic and religious relations in Bulgaria after 1989 has been dominated not by authentic historical discourse but by a tacitly accepted tradition regarding the interpretative capacity of history with respect to the challenges currently arising to the coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities. This tradition should be subjected to methodological doubt. The

sociological perspective on historical reconstruction perceives the past not as a museum exhibit, nor as a resonator of our thinking, but as an enclave through which we obtain unique access to worlds that are not ours and also attain unexpected “insight” into our own world.

3. Outlines of the problem fields

3.1. Inner diversity of Islam

Muslims differ from one another in religious, cultural, economic, and political respects. The Sunni Muslims amount to 85% of all Muslims and are a majority in most Muslim states, while the Shiites, who are 15% of all, are a majority in Iran. The Shiites are divided into three basic groups: the Zaydis, the Ismailites, and the Ithna Ashari, who are the majority in Iran and Iraq. In Islam, there are different, at times mutually opposed, theological currents, schools of law, and Sufi (mystic) branches. There are one billion three hundred million Muslims in the world, living in a total of 57 states in which they constitute the basic part or a considerable part of the population. These states are situated in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia. The languages spoken by various Muslim groups include Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, English, French, German, Danish, Spanish, Bulgarian, etc. The languages, traditions and ethnic groups of the Muslim world represent its diversity. But probably the most vivid examples of internal diversity of the Islamic world are related to its economic and political development. The Arabian Gulf countries that are rich in oil and quickly developing, such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, are very different from impoverished underdeveloped countries like Mali or Yemen. In the political aspect, the Islamic governments of Iran and Sudan contrast with Muslim states that have secular constitutions.

3.2. An ideological model of the Islamic revival

This problem field is related to the modernization of Muslim societies and the interpretation of this modernizing in the context of Islamic activism. The ideologists of the Islamic revival have developed the doctrine that the modernization of the Muslim community is to be achieved only through the prism of religion; they have argued the need for a contemporary interpretation of Islam that matches the challenges of modern times. The revival and transformation of Islam provoked by its dynamic encounter with a constellation of rationalities that modernity represents reveals the specific connection of Islamic activism to the process of modernization. This process is understood in a specific way, whereby modernity is not perceived as a transition from theonomy to autonomy and as a shift of the emphasis of meaning from the past to the future. In taking advantage of the modern

achievements of science and technology, Islamic activism restricts the use of the technological innovations of Western science only to the dissemination of Islam.

3.3.The religious revival of Muslims in Bulgaria

The process of religious revival of Muslims in Bulgaria cannot be simply interpreted as re-Islamization, as some researchers are inclined to see it. It is rather a rediscovery and re-affirming of the values of Islam as a philosophy of life and a moral practice under the conditions of growing diversity of cultural models of social integration. In itself, this process cannot be defined either as encouraging social integration or as a kind of incitement to closure to, and distancing from, the rest of society. It is rather a sort of community response to the disintegration processes and growing social inequalities in Bulgarian society today. The traditional Muslim community used to maintain its own cultural measure without trying to spread its values via active dialogue with the other religious groups, especially not in open debate with the official atheism of state policy. Today's forms of religious mobilization in the Muslim community are significantly different, especially in respect to its willingness not only to strictly follow the requirements of the religious canon but also to preach the values of Islam. The so-called folk Islam has been deeply rethought in the context of modern democratic development and under the impact of contradictory trends that have been defined as a *new Islamic culture* and that indicate the effort being made to build a new, specifically Islamic, modernity.

3.4.The narrative of modernity

The cultural universality of the West has been nourished by values that are felt by Muslims to represent a threat to their religious identity. In turn, the religious arrogance of Islam, which represents a kind of “anti-colonial” resistance against the cultural haughtiness of the West, is “identified” as fundamentalism that threatens postmodern societies. Fear provokes closure with respect to the others, those who are different; but this capsulation might potentially destroy the field of dialogue between Islam and modernity.

The basic constructs, on the Islamic side, resulting from Islam's encounter with modernity are so-called political Islam and Euro-Islam. The two have different aims, different spheres of influence, and apply different strategies, but they are both manifestations of the common striving of Muslims to reform society through religion.

According to the narrative of modernity, Islam, just like other religions, was supposed to lose its strength and, once finding itself in a secular environment, to disappear. But the growing public visibility and vitality of Islam, which is there despite the disciplinary pressure of secularism, has shaken the paradigms and opened a wide space for aggressive nationalist populism and political manipulation related to conjunctural interests (Roy, 2007).

3.5. The mobile characteristics of identity

3.5.1. Spatial and meaning-related aspects in the construction of identity

Achieving ethnic and/or religious identity – but not so much in its spatial coordinates as in respect of its quality (which results from correlating to the others) – is an important step towards overcoming the perception of others as strangers, a perception that may be considered as based on a lack of intersubjectivity. Life together in a living present tends to reject the image of the isolated and self-reproducing community and asserts the notion of a multi-cultural, poly-religious and multi-ethnic reality. The active participants in such a reality correlate to one another in the course of constituting it.

A possible approach in the framework of this perspective would be to look for the dimensions of ethnic and religious identity in the social context, where the predominating trends are actually realized.

3.5.2. The Islamic community as a space of total identity

The analysis of the Islamic community (the Ummah) as a space of total identity can be meaningfully conducted in two basic aspects: the existing notion of community that Muslims have, and the specific nature of the mutual personal and community ties that the faithful maintain when coexisting with the Others. The unwavering idealization of the Ummah in both the historical and theological aspect is a trend that shapes individual and collective consciousness. People are seen as either believers in Allah or infidels. Territories and countries are either “the House of Islam” or “the House of War”. Armed conflicts are either a “holy war” for the true faith or “internecine conflict” (Fitnah). Taxation is either sanctioned by Sharia law or is non-legitimate, etc. In this concrete but comprehensive sense, religious affiliation, the belonging to the Ummah, is established, maintained and transmitted as the fundament of a person’s life; it turns into a total identity. Given the dissolved boundaries between the religious and the secular sphere, the religious norms become a factor that regulates and largely predetermines the social and political reality in the Ummah.

3.5.3. Basic aspects of the normativity of the Islamic community

In Islamic cannon, all possible human activities are encompassed by two categories: permissible (halal) and prohibited (Haram). The religious identity of the true believer would be impossible without this all-encompassing regulation. In other words, all values in Islam are refracted through the lense of “religion”, which is not one value among others but is the integral environment that determines, encourages or penalizes human conduct. How is the integration of the faithful within modern society and the nation state made possible? To what degree are the inner dynamics and cohesion of the Islamic community influenced by the transformations occurring in society? (Given that these are transformation whose historical memory is linked to a different religious dimension and whose political development in history includes periods of passionate rejection of all religious traditions.) Closely connected with these two questions are two essential aspects of the norm in the Islamic community: *1. The prescribed rules of relations and conduct in the family, and 2. Canonic principles of the relation between parents and children and, in a broader aspect, between adults and young people.*

3.5.4. The identification structure of Bulgarian Muslims

The identification structure of Bulgarian Muslims is realized at two levels. The first is the religious one. According to the definitions at this level, the Bulgarian Muslim is a Muslim, the Turk is a Muslim, and the Bulgarian is a non-Muslim. The second level is the ethnic one. According to its definitions, the Bulgarian Muslim is a not pure Turk, the Turk is a Turk, and the Bulgarian is a Bulgarian. On the other hand, religious affiliation increasingly becomes the predominant reference point compared with ethnic self-definition. Under these circumstances, the preconditions exist for a gradual “secondary Turkization” of the Bulgarian Muslims. This trend has a negative effect on ethno-religious relations at the regional level, and it permanently restrains the processes of social integration in the regions with a mixed population. The attempt to abandon a group identity is looked upon with mistrust by both the Bulgarians and the Turks. The Bulgarians, under the influence of their national mythology, are inclined to look upon Bulgarian Muslims as some kind of traitors (who have been made Turks). The Turks, for their part, find it hard to accept the idea that a Muslim does not understand Turkish, regarded as the traditional language for Muslims in Bulgaria. This non-acceptance leaves the Bulgarian Muslims in a very insecure position with respect of their identity.

4. Religion and values

4.1. Religious values as a resource for social activity

Regardless of the canonic differences between various religions, each of them expresses an image of an enduring, meaningfully ordered world. This image attains its ultimate justification by turning into a certain way of life. In this sense, religious values, as a driving force of individual and collective actions, serve as an explanatory reference point that gives us access to the social dimensions of religion. The analysis of the influence of religious convictions upon people's everyday life illuminates an important dimension of their religiousness. The latter inevitably includes actions undertaken out of religious motives that carry religious meaning. In other words, by shedding light on the mutual connection between religious attitudes on one hand and values such as justice, family and work on the other, it is possible to answer the question to what extent these values are a resource for constructing the meaning of the community ties and/or strengthening them.

4.2. Models of participation and forms of solidarity in the religious morals of Islam (the example of Bulgarian Muslims)

In the perspective of dialogical sociology and the tools of the European Values Study (data for Bulgaria, Fourth Wave 2008/2009) we find that the processes of growingly dynamic influence of religious identity are typical not so much for a homogenous religious environment as for the Muslim communities that co-exist with other ethnic-religious groups.

Affiliation to Islam and the Muslim identity shapes a distinct profile of values. In the context of the specific cultural shock caused by the opening up of Bulgarian society to the world, the attitude towards faith and religious symbols has been reassessed. That is why, in the various forms of religious behaviour and belief today, one can discern many elements of traditional, ritualized religiousness, but also new manifestations of the "return to the true faith" or of a new mythological consciousness, which sees its justification in that it ensures the distinctiveness and inner community cohesion of the religious group. The need for religious self-definition compensates for the deficits of social integration into the society at large. In precisely this aspect, the results of the European Values Study can guide us to a deeper and more subtle understanding of the importance of, and answers provided by, religious morality in the face of the daily challenges presented by life in the secular world. In this survey, for a substantial part of the respondents who self-identify as Muslims, religion is no longer a value in itself but is an integral environment that defines the attitude towards all

other values and relationships. Religious morality structures new models of participation and new forms of solidarity. Among those who self-identify as Eastern Orthodox, there is a mostly a traditional respect for the norms of faith, while for a significant part of the Muslims, their religion becomes a measure for assessment and a core of the overall social behaviour. (Босаков, 2009).

5. Between the culture of neighbourhood and religious identity

5.1. Neighbourhood as a measure of the integration potential of society

By its significant meanings and symbolic colouring, neighbourhood, as direct contact and direct spatial proximity with others, defines everyday life. This is the microsocial scale in which the real dimensions of individual achievement are situated and the conditions for success are estimated. The need to comprehensively study this question in terms of space stems from the understanding of identity as a quality that is invariably a result and a condition achieved in the course of relating to others and comparing with others (in this sense, identity is the result of a qualitative definition of the Other). Ethnoreligious distances reveal the parameters of a “contactless tolerance”: in cases when assertions are proposed that do not require direct contact with others, there is greater willingness to look for socially desirable answers. Any concrete attempt to introduce religious awareness of the “others” in a situation of immediate contact leads to decreased potential willingness to accept those different others. The gap between a consistent compliance with religious morality and norms on one hand and the idea of the orthopraxis of the other religious community on the other, generates mistrust, disregard and suspicion as to the motives of people of a different faith. These attitudes correspond to a latent ethno-religious conflict, which is liable to secondary mobilization by political and economic means. In other words, neighbourhood, as a universal social network of everyday practices, is able to compensate for some of the tensions, but its influence remains confined within the framework of a contradiction in mass consciousness – the contradiction between a positive attitude to the neighbor who is of a certain religious confession and, at the same time, suspicion with regard to that religious community as a whole (Босаков, 2010).

5.2. Muslims in Bulgaria in the context of neighbourhood

In looking for the means to overcome the feeling of offended religious identity among the minority, an identity that it often perceives as being under threat, a careful sociological scrutiny of the culture of neighbourhood and of the importance of neighbourhood identifies the following states and processes:

- Growing modernization in everyday life is severely trying for part of the meaning and symbolism of a religion. With respect to Islam in particular, this is one of the fundamental challenges of the new millennium: to devise a model of Islamic modernity in which the basic norms of Islam will preserve their importance, while the elements of the postmodern age that are forcefully entering into the life of society will be integrated without contradiction in the body of ethical views and values typical for the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of Islam;
- The admissibility of religiousness is not yet closely matched by respect for the right of others to be different and to follow religious norms different from one's own;
- The negative trends of development in the relations between tolerance vs. toleration of a different religious identity is a sign of an unfocused mass consciousness (toleration is primarily determined by the restricted option to be other than tolerant, rather than by an authentic culture of tolerance and respect for the different others) (Босаков, 2006).

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