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TOWARDS THE OVERCOMING OF ISLAMISM AND POPULISM: FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Abstract

This study aims to critically examine the thesis of the "clash of civilizations" and to explore whether such a clash is inevitable when the Eastern-Muslim and Western-Christian worlds meet, as well as whether the mutual fear between them is justified and how it is generated and mobilized. In the introductory section, we will provide an overview of the historical relations between these "two worlds" to identify the factors that opened the possibility for the emergence of radical attitudes stemming from concepts such as Islamism and Populism. After that, we will address the question of which factors contributed to their sudden "revival", with particular focus on one of the most frequently cited causes: the refugee crisis. We will examine how this crisis emerged and the nature of the reactions it provoked, specifically the politicization of otherness. In the subsequent analysis, special attention will be given to Western Populism and its Islamophobic policies. Finally, we will explore the concepts of constitutional patriotism, Euro-Islam, and human (universal) brotherhood as potential pathways toward overcoming the negative dichotomy inherent in the notions of Islam and the West, particularly in the context of the role

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of interreligious dialogue in international relations and its contribution to the depoliticization of otherness.

Keywords: Islam, West, Islamism, Populism, Refugee Crisis, Politicization of otherness, Constitutional Patriotism, Euro-Islam, Universal Fraternity, Depoliticization of otherness

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Concepts such as political Islam, also known as Islamism, and Western or European Populism have gained prominence around the same period. What these phenomena share is their reliance on a clearly and negatively defined "other" for their existence. For political Islam, this "other" often consists of the "corrupt Christian West" Europe, and the American and Jewish spheres. For Western Populism, it is typically framed as "Muslim terrorists" or Muslim refugees, who are perceived as potential threats. In both cases, Religion is instrumentalized for political purposes and projected in a distorted form onto the international stage, often manifesting as overt xenophobia. Such dynamics create ample space for fear through the demonization of the other, propagated via political rhetoric and actions, and give rise to conflicts that, in Huntingtonian terms, assume a civilizational dimension (see Huntington 2011). The "clash of civilizations" thesis, which gained traction in post-Cold War international relations, has been widely critiqued. Scholars have demonstrated its limitations and inconsistencies. As Jonathan Fox observes: "This theory has been highly controversial. However, limiting the discussion to actual analyses of Huntington's arguments focusing on whether (1) Islam is more violent than other religions and (2) whether inter-civilizational conflict is in fact more common, the results show that with some important qualifications, neither of these propositions are supported by the evidence. Studies which have actually accumulated lists of conflicts across the world and tested Huntington's predictions against reality found inter-civilizational conflicts to be less common than conflicts within civilizations […], that civilization is not a good predictor of conflict […] and, most violence by Muslims is directed against other Muslims. This higher incidence of intrareligious conflict as opposed to inter-religious conflict is also true of conflicts involving Christians […]" (Fox 2018, 44).

This paper aims to examine how Huntington's thesis, despite its empirical shortcomings, continues to shape encounters between *Eastern-Islamic* and *Western-Christian* worlds – particularly through the frameworks of political Islam and European Populism – as a tool for politicizing otherness, generating fear, and mobilizing identity. Accordingly, our research question is: How does Religion participate in the politicization and depoliticization of otherness, and what are the implications for international relations? This leads to our central hypothesis: Interreligious dialogue, understood as a consensus around fundamental universal values, can most effectively contribute to depoliticizing otherness and mitigating the conflicts it generates on the global stage. In the introductory section, we provide a brief historical overview of interactions between these "opposing subjects" and highlight the conditions that foster radical positions within these two paradigms. We then analyze the concepts of Islamism – as political Islam – and Western Populism, while exploring the factors that have triggered their renewed prominence. Among these, the refugee crisis stands out as a particularly influential catalyst, warranting focused attention due to its profound consequences and its exploitation for the politicization of otherness. This study is anchored in the work of German-Iranian author Navid Kermani, particularly his book *Who Are We? Germany and Its Muslims* (see Kermani 2013). Kermani examines the interplay between identity politics and the environments that shape both Muslim and European identities. Central to his inquiry is the question of how these identities can coexist. Drawing on his personal experience as a German Muslim, Kermani illustrates the challenge of simultaneously embracing one's Muslim identity while fully participating in European society. The tension inherent in this dual identification epitomizes the core problem of the politicization of otherness. Kermani's analysis highlights that Islam should not be understood as a closed theological or strictly national phenomenon, but as a politically engaged, transnational reality that inevitably raises questions regarding encounters with otherness. Situating this study within the framework of international politics is therefore essential. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Islam – once primarily considered a religious teaching – suddenly became a central subject in global affairs, prompting increased attention to the intersection of Religion and international relations.

The post-9/11 emergence of Islam on the international stage contributed to the perception of widespread Islamophobia within the

Euro-Atlantic sphere, a trend that became particularly pronounced in the U.S. by 2004. Initial steps toward mutual understanding were largely bypassed, and both the "War on Terror" and subsequent diplomatic engagements with the Taliban represented a plunge into uncharted territory. Scholars such as John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago) and Stephen Walt (Harvard University) have highlighted U.S. failures in adequately understanding Islamic societies during this period, emphasizing the consequences of such misperceptions. The repercussions of these misunderstandings were also felt in Europe, where they exacerbated pre-existing fears and generated new anxieties – a phenomenon analyzed by scholars such as Dominique Moïsi and Zygmunt Bauman, the latter of whom titled his work *Strangers at Our Door* (see Bauman 2018). Our focus will center on the complex question of what kind of "foreigner" Islam represents for the West, and vice versa, drawing in particular on the scholarship of John Esposito (Georgetown University), editor of *The Oxford History of Islam*. Finally, the study explores the European response through the lens of Populism. Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev's characterization of the refugee crisis as "Europe's September 11" underscores its transformative impact. In conclusion, we examine potential pathways toward depoliticizing otherness, highlighting approaches such as Jan-Werner Müller's concept of constitutional patriotism (also endorsed by Kermani), Bassam Tibi's notion of Euro-Islam, and Pope Francis's vision of universal fraternity. Throughout, we argue that while the post-9/11 global order has often politicized otherness, Religion possesses significant potential to facilitate its depoliticization.

ISLAM AND THE WEST: ONGOING COMPLEXITY

The historical relations between the Islamic and Western worlds demonstrate a persistent complexity, marked by continuous interconnection as well as recurring distance. This interconnection primarily manifested on a religious level, as the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – share the Abrahamic tradition, providing a foundation for potential cooperation. Nevertheless, historical and, above all, political circumstances created far more space for conflict. As John Esposito notes: "Ancient rivalries and modern conflicts have so accentuated differences as to completely obscure the shared theological roots and vision of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic

tradition. Both sides have focused solely on and reinforced differences, and have polarized rather than united these three great interrelated monotheistic traditions" (Esposito 1999, 23).

In this paper, our focus is not on the historical development of Islam as a religion, whose dynamism and success certainly challenged Western Christianity, but rather on its social and political dimensions. Islam, given the environment of its emergence and expansion, did not differentiate sharply between the sacred and the profane, the private and the public, or Religion and politics. Muhammad was understood simultaneously as God's messenger and as a political leader – one who judged, organized, and guided the community. The Prophet embodied the full complexity of the faith he conveyed to those who submit: "Religion was integral to the leadership, life, and fabric of society, providing norms for worship (duties to God) and social life (duties to society). If Islam means submission to the will of God, the Muslim is one who submits, that is, follows or actualizes God's will in both individual and community life" (Esposito 1999, 27). After the Prophet's death, no consensus existed on how God's will should shape the organization of the Islamic community, as the Prophet left no detailed guidance on political matters. This led to divergent views on succession. One faction argued that senior followers should select leadership, while another maintained that it should remain within the Prophet's family. These differences gave rise to the enduring Sunni-Shia split. Politically, the Sunni approach prevailed, establishing a caliphal system that would later evolve through centralization, imperial expansion, and the establishment of dynastic rule. The Islamic community's political organization ushered in a period of territorial expansion. From initially fragmented Bedouin tribes, Muslims unified and projected their presence onto the stage of international politics, defeating empires such as the Byzantine and Persian. Submission to God and the principle of jihad served as the "wings" on which Islamic armies advanced, instilling fear within Western Christendom.

The concept of jihad is multifaceted. While a detailed analysis exceeds the scope of this study, it is crucial to note that jihad fundamentally differs from the interpretation offered by Islamic fundamentalists or Western populists. It is not merely a "holy war against infidels" or the "spreading of the faith by the sword". Instead, it is first and foremost a spiritual struggle of the believer against Satan and oneself. Only secondarily can it involve preaching, teaching, or armed conflict,

understood in the context of the inter-tribal struggles of the early Arab world. For Christians who witnessed Muslim expansion, the readiness to sacrifice life for faith generated fear and contributed to a distance from another Abrahamic religion: "Ancient historical and theological affinities went unnoticed as the Christian West, Church and State, faced the onslaught of an enemy which it found easier to demonize and to dismiss as barbarian and infidel than to understand" (Esposito 1999, 36). Despite military conquests, Islam did not erase the other two monotheistic religions. There is ample evidence of Islamic tolerance toward the "People of the Book", Jews and Christians, although this tolerance was conditional. Non-Muslims could secure protection under Muslim rule but lacked full religious rights. Resistance could provoke conflict and lead to the acceptance of Islamic authority. A pivotal moment occurred in the 11th century, when Christian forces felt compelled to defend Jerusalem, which had been conquered by Muslim armies in the 7th century. The ensuing Crusades (11th-13th centuries), sanctioned by Pope Urban II, sought to reclaim the city but ultimately resulted in extensive destruction with limited strategic success. Conflict soon turned intra-Christian, as Latin forces targeted Orthodox Christians, prefiguring the eventual fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottomans.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople became a major political and cultural center, while Islamic power was halted at Vienna in 1683. Thereafter, Western dominance began, and Islam came under sustained European scrutiny. Negative stereotypes of Muslims, many of which persist today, can be traced to this period. Memories of Crusades and European colonialism, coupled with the subjugation of Muslim lands, contributed to a perception of Muslim "civilizational incapacity" in organizing society. Esposito summarizes Muslim perspectives on this historical context: "Muslim views of the West and responses to its power and ideas varied from rejection and confrontation to admiration and imitation. However, the prevailing mood was one of conflict and competition. For many, colonialism conjured up memories of the Crusades; the European challenge and aggression was but another phase of militant Christianity's war with Islam; Europe was the enemy that threatened both the faith of Islam and the political life of the Muslim community. The political crisis precipitated by European colonialism was accompanied by a spiritual one: 'The fundamental spiritual crisis in Islam in the twentieth century stems from an awareness that something

is awry between the religion which God has appointed and the historical development of the world which He controls'" (Esposito 1999, 49).

MOBILIZATION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY: ISLAMISM

The response to crises in the Islamic world took the form of so-called political Islam, or Islamism. At the beginning of the 20th century, some Muslims recognized the necessity for Islam to become an actively engaged faith in both national and international politics. This urgency arose primarily because the Islamic world faced threats both internally and externally. Internally, threats came from those who distorted the faith, while externally, they came from Israel, the United States, and their Western European allies. Consequently, the phenomenon of political Islam emerged, which can be broadly defined as follows: "Political Islam can be broadly defined as the mobilization of Islamic identity in pursuit of particular objectives of public policy, both within an Islamic society and in its relations with other societies. At that level of generality, political Islam is neither new, nor transient, nor necessarily negative. In fact, the mobilization of Islamic identity toward such goals can be seen as integral to the legitimate right of Muslim peoples to self-determination" (An-Na'im 1999, 103).

Although this definition emphasizes that political Islam is not a novel phenomenon, it gains new significance when considered in the context of modern political developments and identity mobilization. In particular, global events – such as the legacies of colonialism and military defeats at the hands of Israel, backed by the U.S. – had a profound impact on the Islamic world. Ideologically, the Muslim world was caught between Marxism and socialism (both associated with atheism) and liberalism (vastly reduced to capitalism), creating a vacuum that political Islam sought to fill. As Ruthven observes: "On the political level; the collapse of communism and the failure of Marxism to overcome the stigma of 'atheism' makes Islam seem an attractive ideological weapon against post-colonial regimes perceived as corrupt and authoritarian and sometimes tyrannical" (Ruthven 2012, 21).

Kermani complements this perspective by highlighting an internal crisis within orthodox Islamic teaching itself: "Fundamentalism did not emerge within orthodox teaching, but arose as a response to the crisis in which it found itself. Orthodox teaching could no longer provide answers, and thus political Islam emerged among urban populations

within the middle class" (Kermani 2013, 69). At the core of political Islam lies identity politics. This is the central point of Kermani's analysis, as reflected in the title of his book *Who Are We?* His understanding of identity encompasses two critical dimensions: distinctiveness and tolerance. Drawing on historical examples of parallel societies, he notes: "In the Habsburg monarchy or the Ottoman Empire, until recently in cities such as Samarkand and Sarajevo, and even today in Isfahan or Los Angeles, parallel societies were not, or are not yet, a terrifying vision but a way in which minorities managed to live relatively undisturbed, preserving their language and culture. Without such parallel societies, there would likely no longer be Christians in the Middle East, and their current exodus is largely connected to the fatal pressures to enforce unity and abandon cultural distinctiveness. Such pressure is sometimes exerted by the majority, sometimes by the authorities, and sometimes by a few hundred terrorists" (Kermani 2013, 10). Kermani emphasizes that if identity politics lacks either distinctiveness or tolerance, it becomes exclusive and conflictual, transforming political identity into Fundamentalism. The space for such radicalization stems from the deficit of clearly defined identity in the modern world, or what could be termed modern Islam: "Fundamentalist ideas are attractive precisely because they provide people with what is most lacking in the modern, globalized world: clarity, binding rules, and lasting group membership – in a word, identity" (Kermani 2013, 12). Identity inherently implies particularity, raising the crucial question of self-definition: who are "we" and who are "they"?

Regarding Islam, one may ask whether a Muslim today is solely one who fulfills the Five Pillars of Faith, or whether someone can be considered Muslim while simultaneously living their religious identity alongside, or in harmony with, another identity. Kermani argues for the latter approach, which involves broadening the self rather than narrowing it: "It is therefore entirely natural to identify with one thing or another, but it becomes dangerous when a single identity is given absolute importance, when a person becomes only Christian, Muslim, German, Iranian […]. The pragmatic simplification inherent in any identification, in such cases, becomes a narrowing of the personality. Even more dangerously, the acceptance of a particular identity is always based on opposition to other identities" (Kermani 2013, 20).

From this perspective, fanatical Muslims may object, fearing that broadening the self could dilute Islam. Historically, debates on

secularization and Westernization within Islam have reflected similar concerns. The appeal of Western modernity and European education was strong for some Muslims to the extent that confident thinkers openly advocated for an Islamic reformation. Politically, two issues dominated these discussions: Islam's relationship with national identity and its independence. Accordingly, attitudes toward the West developed along two lines: embracing achievements such as the French Revolution and liberal nationalism, or rejecting Western imperialist ambitions.

The mobilization of Islamic identity, as manifested in Islamism, is in part conditioned by a pervasive culture of humiliation. This sense of humiliation emerges from the conviction that an external Other will dictate the course of one's life, politics, economy, culture, and society (see Moïsi 2009, 73). Within a framework shaped by the authoritative discourses of scholars and religious authorities, it becomes readily feasible to construct the Other as an entity intent on subjugation and degradation. Consequently, any personal or collective failures are projected onto the Other rather than acknowledged internally. The operative logic positions the self invariably within the realm of the good, while relegating otherness exclusively to the domain of the malign. Among specific segments of the Muslim faithful, the West is construed as the Other whose ambition is the control of the Islamic world. While this perception may have contained elements of truth in specific historical contexts, such a stance is not only epistemically flawed but also profoundly perilous. It is precisely upon this mindset and the accompanying culture of humiliation that Islamism has arisen – as a politicized and ideologically instrumentalized distortion of Islam – producing profound ramifications both within the Islamic world and across the broader field of international relations.

THE POLITICIZATION OF OTHERNESS

Political Islam, despite being a highly diverse movement composed of varying and sometimes opposing ideologies, has consistently directed its political focus toward two central elements: identity and otherness. These elements are equally significant for both conservatives advocating the full implementation of Sharia law and for those inclined toward representative democracy and human rights. While we have already explored the concept of identity, we now turn to the notion of open otherness. Kermani situates Islam and otherness in the following way: "For Islam, the West is otherness – something from which some distance

themselves, while others use it as a reference point to determine their own position and population. Upon closer examination, we see that the debate essentially concerns Islam itself, that is, its own society, rather than the West. [...] Like everyone else, Western Europe needs otherness to define itself. This role is not reserved exclusively for Islam, yet it is currently the most significant otherness for Western Europe. It is no coincidence that in Germany the debate on multiculturalism practically comes down to a discussion about Muslims, and it should be emphasized that it is not a discussion with Muslims, but mostly about them" (Kermani 2013, 25–28). Kermani's framework requires careful unpacking to allow a critical response. However, before doing so, it is essential to consider the international circumstances that brought these "othernesses" into confrontation once more. September 11, 2001, arguably represents one of the most consequential moments in contemporary global politics. The attacks aimed to terrify the "corrupt Euro-Atlantic world", leaving lasting consequences not only for those directly affected but also for anyone living under the threat of terrorism for years to come. Ironically, the most significant damage inflicted on Islam itself – far exceeding that caused by external attackers – was perpetrated by radical Muslims.

In the immediate aftermath, U.S. President George W. Bush announced a "War on Terror", followed by invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Both sides offered strong justifications. Malise Ruthven links these attacks directly to U.S. involvement in the region: "The Islamist attack on America, organized and facilitated by the Islamist al-Qaeda group under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, was largely inspired by the presence of US troops on the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia. This was itself a response to the threat to US oil supplies posed by the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait. 9/11 and the logic of George W. Bush's 'war on terror' resulted in US-led wars against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the Saddam regime in Iraq" (Ruthven 2012, 4).

In this case, otherness was perceived as an enemy to be re-educated, whether it was the "corrupt West" or the "Islamic terrorists." The Western method, however, resembled a modern-day crusade, advancing against an enemy that was poorly understood: "What is amazing is that so many American policymakers and pundits were confident they could fundamentally alter the political landscape in a host of Middle Eastern countries and turn them into democracies. The United States was intervening in countries it knew astonishingly little

about – few government officials even spoke Arabic or knew that Sunni and Shi'a were different branches of Islam – and its violation of those states' right of self-determination was bound to generate resentment" (Mearsheimer 2018, 169).

The consequences of this Western intervention were catastrophic. Two decades after the "War on Terror" was declared, U.S. forces have intervened militarily in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria. Despite billions of dollars spent, the Taliban have regained power in Afghanistan, and Al-Qaeda maintains cells not only in the Middle East but also in Europe, North Africa, the Sahel, and Central and Southeast Asia. Guantanamo Bay, opened four months after the attacks, costs U.S. taxpayers approximately $7.5 million per prisoner annually. In total, 7,000 American soldiers and 8,000 contractors have died, while half a million civilians – primarily in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – have been killed. As Mearsheimer emphasizes, Western powers intervened in countries they knew remarkably little about, failing even to grasp basic divisions within Islam. This exclusive perception of otherness carried enormous global costs. Today, more than twenty-one million people are refugees or internally displaced. Harvard professor Stephen Walt captures the essence of this strategic failure: "Designing an effective foreign policy strategy requires anticipating how others will react, yet government officials – not to mention the broader public – often know very little about the countries whose behavior they are trying to influence" (Walt 2020).

This disregard for understanding the Other opened the door to further crises, producing immense suffering both within the Islamic world and globally. Conflicts in the Middle East, the Arab Spring, and the failed revolutions in Syria and Libya, coupled with the collapse of U.S. diplomacy, catalyzed the rise of religious Fundamentalism. Radical rhetoric spread quickly through networks, enticing young people from affected regions and Europe to join ISIL. Years of conflict and competition for resources fueled the rise of Islamic extremism. For decades, international politics assumed that the Peace of Westphalia had confined Religion to the private sphere. Peter Berger, however, challenged this assumption in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*: "My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever" (Berger 1999, 2).

Meanwhile, drone strikes under President Barack Obama, often hitting civilians, contributed to the growth of Populism in affected regions. Müller insightfully explains the dynamic: "Populists in office continue to polarize and prepare the people for nothing less than what is conjured up as a kind of apocalyptic confrontation." (Müller 2017b, 42). These apocalyptic confrontations unfolded from September 11 onwards across Europe – in France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom – fueling European populists' defense of a supposedly "Christian" Europe.

All of this has culminated in the politicization of otherness – a phenomenon that accompanies both Islamism and Populism, which, by instrumentalizing Religion, seek to demonize the Other in terms of difference and alterity, portraying them as the source of every threat. A deeper theological examination reveals that religions such as Christianity and Islam, in their essence, do not endorse division. Religious teachings aim to affirm diversity, yet diversity and division are not synonymous. Diversity is inherently positive and inclusive; it signals authenticity and distinctiveness while inviting the recognition and acceptance of the authenticity and uniqueness of the Other. In contrast, division is detrimental and exclusive, as it fosters fear and conflict, erecting boundaries that transform "us" versus "them". Within this dialectic of diversity and division lies the core of the politicization of otherness as a source of religious misuse, which frequently carries direct implications for international relations.

THE MOBILIZATION OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: POPULISM

The West once again became fearful of Islam. Following a series of terrorist attacks, Islam increasingly became associated with negative connotations in Europe. Drawing on Kermani's study, Dominique Moïsi observes: "Identity is strongly linked with confidence, and in turn confidence, or the lack thereof, is expressed in emotions – in particular, those of fear, hope, and humiliation" (Moïsi 2009, 12). In the dynamic between Islam and the West, fear, hope, and humiliation intermingled on both sides. For Muslims living in Europe – many of whom had embraced the achievements of European democracies – life suddenly became precarious. As Malise Ruthven notes: "Yet Muslims living in the West and in the growing Islam areas of the Muslim world that come within the West's electronic footprint understandably resent the

exposure that comes with the increasing concerns of outsiders. Islam, they would argue, is a religion of peace: the word Islam, a verbal noun meaning submission (to God), is etymologically related to the word *salam*, meaning peace. The standard greeting most Muslims use when joining a gathering or meeting strangers is *as-salaam 'alaikum* – 'peace be upon you'. According to a widely held view, people who accuse Islam of being a violent religion misunderstand its essentially pacific nature" (Ruthven 2012, 1–2).

Fear is thus understandable – both as a psychological reaction to terrorism and, according to some scholars, as an instinctive response of the "behavioral immune system" to perceived external threats (see Aarøe, Petersen and Arceneaux 2017). Terrorists exploit this fear, but other actors also benefit from it. Kermani rightly emphasizes that: "Once again, however, it has become clear that many Muslims do wish to live in the modern world, but have not yet grasped the rules of the game that govern it. In the modern world, one can boycott someone's products, write articles, spend money on media campaigns, or lobby, but no one has the right to attack embassies or threaten people with death" (Kermani 2013, 35). The problem arises when this lack of understanding provokes reactions – not only from frightened citizens or those showing solidarity with stigmatized Muslims, but also from politicians and religious figures, such as Germany's CDU or Pope Francis. It is also exploited by those who link terrorism and the refugee crisis in the most negative terms, using the discourse of threatened European and Christian identity as a tool. As Kermani notes: "The discourse of identity always and everywhere appears under the guise of self-defense and the struggle for self-preservation" (Kermani 2013, 39).

The refugee crisis has been a primary catalyst for this. Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev argues: "The refugee crisis has fundamentally changed the state of play in Europe. It can't be explained solely by the influx of refugees or labor migrants. It is, among many other things, also a migration of arguments, emotions, political identities, and votes. The refugee crisis turned out to be Europe's 9/11" (Krastev 2017, 19). Just as American democracy was tested after September 11, 2001, European democracy now faces a critical moment. Democracy itself has become a malleable concept, allowing populists to fill it with their own vision, presenting themselves as resolute defenders of European democracy and European values. Post-communist Eastern European

countries, refusing to accept refugees, framed this resistance as a defense of national identity.

Populism, Müller observes, is inseparable from representative democracy: "Populism arises with the introduction of representative democracy; it is its shadow" (Müller 2017b, 20). European populists exploit fear of the Other, portraying Muslim immigrants as a demographic, cultural, and religious threat. Moïsi emphasizes: "The fear of the Other grows out of demography and geography. 'They' are too numerous and without hope where they are. 'We' are too few and so (comparatively) wealthy where we live. The more we need them for the growth of our economies (given our low birthrates), the more we reject them emotionally on cultural, religious, and racial grounds" (Moïsi 2009, 102). Populism is thus a form of identity politics aimed at exclusion. As Müller notes: "Populism is always *a form of identity politics* (though not all versions of identity politics are populist). What follows from this understanding of populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics is that populism tends to pose a danger to democracy. For democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens" (Müller 2017b, 3).

Although populists present themselves as defenders of democracy, they are, paradoxically, one of its greatest threats. The question of Islam's compatibility with democracy or Sharia's alignment with international law is legitimate; the problem emerges when European populists frame it. Islam, unlike Christianity, lacks a centralized canonical authority, leaving room for diverse interpretations. As Kermani cites Imam Ali: "'The Qur'an is a book between two covers, which does not speak; it is people who speak with it'. Revelation requires interpretation, and one can only speak about Islam if different interpretations and their real-political effects are taken into account" (Kermani 2013, 86).

Tolerance is inherent to Islam. Medieval scholars emphasized the five purposes (*maqasid*) of Islamic law: the preservation of Religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property. Preservation of Religion prioritized defense, not attack. These principles align with human rights in their essence, and most Muslims accept the concept, opposing only elements perceived as Western impositions, such as the freedom to change Religion. The challenge for the West lies not in Islam as a threat, but as a call to understand its diversity: "Contemporary Islam is more a challenge than a threat. It challenges the West to know and understand the diversity

of the Muslim experience. It challenges Muslim governments to be more responsive to popular demands for political liberalization and greater popular participation, to tolerate rather than repress nonviolent Opposition movements, and to build viable democratic institutions, while containing violent extremism and terrorism. At the same time, it challenges Western powers to stand by the democratic values they embody, distinguish between authentic populist movements and violent revolutionaries, and recognize the right of all people to determine the nature of their government and leadership" (Esposito 1999, 270–271).

Nevertheless, the mobilization of Christian identity, embodied in Populism, is partially conditioned by a culture of fear. This fear stems from the fact that, for the first time in more than two centuries, the West no longer holds the decisive voice (see Moïsi 2009, 90). Here, too, there is a substitution of theses whereby the self is held responsible for what is good, and otherness for what is bad. Unemployment, insecurity, and other societal hardships in the West are primarily the result of personal responsibility, rather than being secondary to external influences. Yet, among segments of the Western public, populist leaders have succeeded in imposing the perception that the Other seeks to forcibly reshape their politics, economy, society, and culture. This, in turn, gives rise to a culture of fear, which is produced and amplified by Populism. It is necessary, however, to qualify this observation: while it is true that some individuals who arrived in Europe, defined by an Other identity, caused problems and even engaged in terrorist acts, this does not grant anyone the right to stigmatize entire civilizations. Achieving such a nuanced understanding requires a high degree of discernment and critical judgment.

THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF THE OTHERNESS

In the preceding discussion, the phrase "commitment to democratic values" emerges as particularly salient. This prompts a critical question: Can the West genuinely be considered committed to democratic values if it permits Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to conduct entire political campaigns for his Fidesz party using overtly Islamophobic rhetoric, claiming that Muslims will inundate Europe and fundamentally Islamize it? The situation escalated further in Germany, where, leveraging Islamophobia, the far-right party AfD (*Alternative for Germany*) – including elements with neo-Nazi affiliations – secured

parliamentary representation and entered the Bundestag. Does this suggest that Islamophobia is politically advantageous in Europe?

It is imperative to emphasize that such fear is initially fueled by actors "who know Islam well" and have perpetrated terrorist attacks. However, it would be overly simplistic to halt the analysis there, as discussed in previous sections. The existence of fear is undeniable; the central question remains: how can it be addressed and overcome? To approach this issue, one must return to the foundational concepts of political life: identity and, concomitantly, otherness. These concepts are interdependent, much like freedom and responsibility – one cannot be meaningfully considered without the other. Drawing upon his personal experience, Kermani advocates for the concept of constitutional patriotism, stating: "Rarely have I ever felt so proud of Germany as on the day I received my second citizenship, German citizenship, and that without any special ceremony – just a simple, warm handshake in the hall of the foreigners' office in central Cologne. That act was sober as an expression of 'constitutional patriotism' and astonishingly composed, just like my understanding of the whole matter" (Kermani 2013, 102).

Within this framework, loyalty is not directed exclusively toward the nation as an ethnic or historical entity, but toward a community grounded in shared political values such as democracy and freedom of thought. The European Union, under this conceptualization, is not an end in itself but a platform for public deliberation and civic engagement. Through such a culture of debate, and with respect for the "constitution" of Europe, it becomes possible to discern what Europe is – or ought to be. Yet, a potential pitfall exists: the creation of a meta-identity. National, ethnic, and religious identities must remain in solidarity without being supplanted by a singular, homogenized European identity, which risks assuming the characteristics of a "civic religion". Thus, Europe requires a rigorous re-examination of its own identity through open debate rather than its marginalization. At its core, constitutional patriotism addresses the question of how individuals can coexist: "The deepest impulse animating a normatively substantive account of constitutional patriotism is the idea of individuals recognizing each other as free and equal and finding fair terms of living together; in other words, to find enough common, mutually acceptable grounds to answer the question, 'How do want to live together?' In a sense, you might say, it's nothing less than the political question as such" (Müller 2007a, 52–53).

Within this framework, it is essential not to undermine the specificity of religious Identity, particularly for Muslims, for whom Religion often constitutes a primary identity. Kermani emphasizes that such identities must remain open both to their own development and to otherness, understood as the recognition of difference: "The culture of the West worth fighting for and promoting is special in that it is based on specificities, unlike religions, which inevitably claim universal validity. In this way, Europe allows for the specificities of religions and their pluralism. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Europe, and of the entire West, is that they have developed a form of governance that not only tolerates different faiths and worldviews but treats them entirely equally – or at least should do so – regardless of whether it encourages or limits them. Western culture would best demonstrate its current superiority and readiness for a leading role in the world by granting Muslims those freedoms that Christians in the Islamic world are often denied" (Kermani 2013, 109).

Another proposed solution to the challenges in Islam – West relations is Bassam Tibi's concept of Euro-Islam. Tibi begins from the premise that Religion is a social reality, underscoring its role in socio-cultural and international relations. He asserts that the politicization of Religion as a social fact generates fundamentalist ideologies (Tibi 2012, 188). To mitigate Fundamentalism in the encounter between Islam and the West, Tibi advocates for Euro-Islam, drawing upon Ibn Khaldūn's notion of *asabiyya*, understood as the "civilizational self-consciousness" underpinning every civilization. Euro-Islam, therefore, must manifest as a distinct Euro-Islamic self-consciousness, given that "the self-consciousness of Europe (and of Islam) is facing a challenge" (Tibi 2008, 26). In this framework, there is no "clash of civilizations"; instead, a shared consciousness emerges with the goal of conflict resolution. Both Europe and Islam have responsibilities in this process. Europe must overcome two extremes: the populist-Islamophobic response and the multicultural approach grounded in cultural relativism (Tibi 2008, 191). Islam's contribution, according to Tibi, involves reforming orthodox practice, which he argues should not be dictated by European norms (see Tibi 2001, 226). Muslims are called to adopt an "upgraded identity", embracing cultural pluralism, diversity, and adherence to fundamental values and human rights. Tibi articulates this succinctly: "Muslims themselves must make a choice between the sermon and Kant, or, in the case of Europe, between a Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam – that is,

between the Islamization of Europe or the Europeanization of Islam" (Tibi 2008, 31).

Despite their conceptual appeal, neither constitutional patriotism nor Euro-Islam has achieved practical success, as both initiate solutions from the starting point of identity. This presents a dual problem: first, while identity is not always contingent on Religion, Religion is inherently tied to identity. Efforts to "upgrade" identity in universalist terms risk imposing a monopolistic claim on universality, thereby engendering conflict. Second, both approaches, although emphasizing diversity and cultural pluralism, fall short in addressing otherness; they stop at mobilizing identity without engaging its core political dynamics. The key, therefore, lies in addressing the politicization of otherness. Here, Pope Francis' initiatives provide a valuable model. Rather than first defining "who we are" and then "who they are", the Pope reverses this logic, prioritizing an understanding of the other. Moreover, he insists that such understanding must emerge from dialogue with the other, rather than unilateral pronouncements. This approach underpinned his successful diplomatic engagement in the United Arab Emirates in 2019, where he participated in an interfaith conference promoting moderate Islam and combating religious extremism. During this visit, he met with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University Ahmed al-Tayeb, resulting in the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Pope Francis, 2019), which affirms that religions must never incite war, hatred, hostility, or extremism: "This was no mere diplomatic gesture, but a reflection born of dialogue and common commitment" (Pope Francis 2020, 5). A year later, in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, the Pope went further, focusing not on enhancing identity. Still, on depoliticizing otherness, rescuing it from populist demonization: "Certain populist political regimes, as well as certain liberal economic approaches, maintain that an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs. Arguments are also made for the propriety of limiting aid to poor countries, so that they can reach rock bottom and be forced to take austerity measures. One fails to realize that behind such statements, which are abstract and difficult to support, great numbers of lives are at stake. Many migrants have fled from war, persecution, and natural catastrophes. Others, rightly, 'are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it'" (Pope Francis 2020, 37).

According to Pope Francis, the politicization of otherness manifests in the creation of a xenophobic mentality: "Then too, in some host countries, migration causes fear and alarm, often fomented and exploited for political purposes. This can lead to a xenophobic mentality, as people close in on themselves, and it needs to be addressed decisively. Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. Hence, they ought to be 'agents in their own redemption'. No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings; yet, in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, and less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable, since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race, or Religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love" (Pope Francis 2020, 39).

By emphasizing the recognition of every human being as a child of God, the Pope fosters a framework in which all religions can promote universal fraternity: "Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance" (Pope Francis 2020, 271). Instead, interreligious dialogue should contribute to international relations by depoliticizing otherness and mitigating conflict and violence. Although some critics have dismissed this diplomacy as utopian, it has achieved practical results, as specific Muslim communities have responded positively to the outreach. Theoretically, it establishes a vital principle: before discussing identity, one must first understand the processes that politicize otherness, then seek to depoliticize it. Only subsequently can authentic discussions of identity occur.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This study aimed to address the research question: How does Religion, through the misuse of perception, contribute to the politicization of otherness, and conversely, how can it, through proper reception, facilitate its depoliticization? In line with this inquiry, we formulated the hypothesis that the abuse of Religion can significantly drive the politicization of otherness. Interreligious dialogue may be the most effective mechanism for depoliticizing international relations. We sought to substantiate this hypothesis through an analysis of the complex

interactions between Islam and the West, both in the broader transatlantic context encompassing the United States and in the more focused regional context of Western Europe, which is particularly pertinent to this study.

As our analysis has demonstrated, the role of Religion in international affairs has historically been underestimated. Following the Peace of Westphalia, Religion was widely perceived as a relic of a bygone era, rendered irrelevant primarily to contemporary political practice. Yet, as sociologists and later political scientists have acknowledged, such assumptions proved fundamentally erroneous. This widespread misjudgment led to a profound lack of understanding of Religion as a dynamic social reality. Conversely, religious actors have consistently recognized the potency of their soft power, particularly in the realm of public diplomacy. This creates a critical dynamic: identity is most readily mobilized through Religion, for Religion is inherently linked to identity, and identity, in turn, is closely associated with the emotional states of humiliation, fear, and hope.

As Dominique Moïsi has observed, contemporary societies exhibit deeply developed cultures of these emotional states. Notably, two are particularly salient: the Islamic culture of humiliation and the European culture of fear. Both are exploited by actors seeking to mobilize collective identity for political purposes. On one hand, political Islam or Islamism harnesses Islamic identity to defend against perceived threats intended to humiliate the community. On the other hand, European Populism mobilizes Christian identity to resist an "enemy" that is perceived as intimidating. The refugee crisis has thus transformed Europe into a theater in which these two distinct "-isms" intersect.

Efforts to resolve these tensions have traditionally focused on reconciling conflicting identities. However, we argue that this approach is fundamentally flawed. Initiatives such as multiculturalism, constitutional patriotism, and Euro-Islam have failed mainly, or continue to struggle, because they adopt identity as the starting point. In doing so, solution-oriented actors, whether consciously or unconsciously, employ the very logic and mechanisms they purport to counter, effectively attempting to defend an abstract, constructed meta-identity rather than addressing the underlying issue.

Through a detailed analysis of various approaches, we have demonstrated precisely where this error resides. Identity, particularly when intertwined with Religion, is resistant to modification, given its deep roots in centuries of doctrine, culture, and tradition. Attempts to

"upgrade" or adapt it are thus prone to failure. What is amenable to change, however, is the understanding of otherness. In this context, Pope Francis's approach offers a noteworthy model. His diplomacy does not commence by defining "who we are" and then attempting to categorize "who they are". Instead, it inverts this logic, beginning with a careful inquiry into the identity and dignity of the other. Moreover, when addressing the question of who the other is, solutions are not imposed unilaterally; instead, they emerge through dialogue with those concerned. This methodological innovation underpins the success of his initiatives, exemplified by his 2019 visit to the United Arab Emirates and the subsequent promotion of interfaith collaboration.

The imperative, therefore, is to transition from a religion that politicizes otherness – mobilizing identity in the process – toward a religion capable of fostering dialogue. Interreligious dialogue, by actively depoliticizing otherness, holds the potential to generate new opportunities within international relations. Recognizing and harnessing this potential may enable the global community to address one of the most pressing challenges of our time: mitigating the politicization of otherness and fostering a more inclusive, peaceful framework for coexistence.

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КА ПРЕВАЗИЛАЖЕЊУ ИСЛАМИЗМА И ПОПУЛИЗМА: ОД МЕЂУНАРОДНИХ ОДНОСА ДО МЕЂУРЕЛИГИЈСКОГ ДИЈАЛОГА

Резиме

Овај рад има за циљ да критички преиспита тезу о „сукобу цивилизација" и да истражи да ли је такав сукоб неизбежан при сусрету источно-муслиманског и западно-хришћанског света, као и да ли је међусобни страх између њих оправдан и на који начин се ствара и мобилише. У уводном делу биће дат преглед историјских односа између ова „два света" како би се идентификовали фактори који су отворили могућност за појаву радикалних ставова који произилазе из концепата као што су исламизам и популизам. Након тога, биће размотрено питање који фактори су допринели њиховом изненадном „оживљавању", са посебним осврtом на један од најчешће навођених узрока: избегличку кризу. Испитаћемо како је настала ова криза и какве реакције је изазвала, посебно имајући у виду политизацију другости. У даљој анализи посебна пажња биће посвећена западном популизму и његовим исламофобним политикама. На крају ћемо разматрати концепте уставног патриотизма, евро-ислама и људског (универзалног) братства као потенцијалне путеви за превазилажење негативне дихотомије у интеракцији ислама и Запада, нарочито у контексту улоге међурелигијског дијалога у међународним односима и његовог доприноса процесу деполитизације другости.

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Кључне речи: ислам, Запад, исламизам, популизам, избегличка криза, политизација другости, уставни патриотизам, евро-ислам, универзално братство, деполитизација другости

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