Taboos as a Cultural Cleavage Between Muslim Immigrants and Secular Western Publics: Bridging the Gaps by Viewing Integration as a Two-Way Process

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ABSTRACT: A taboo is an activity that is forbidden or sacred based on religious beliefs or morals. Taboos are usually culturally specific. That which may be discussed or done in one culture (incest, abortion, out of wedlock pregnancy, forced marriage, same-sex-marriage, legalizing drugs, etc.) may be highly taboo in another culture. Arab and Islamic societies are strongly religious in their values, while in comparison most Western countries are almost always more secular, and hence religion is represented as a barrier that seems to hamper the integration and inclusion of Muslim minorities into Western societies, an element that poses a challenge to the Western lifestyle and may even encourage the legitimacy of public Islamophobic discourses. So, to what extent do Muslim immigrants carry their cultural practices with them, including taboos, and to what extent do they integrate into Western countries, where civic laws have replaced religious sanctions when taboos are broken? The knowledge of taboos and the ability to deal with them is one of the keys to successful integration as a two-way process between Muslim immigrants and the receiving society.

Keywords: Taboos, Islamophobia, religion, integration, Muslims and Western Publics

INTRODUCTION

Immigrants have taken along their faiths and practices and adapted them to living in their host societies (Saunders et al. 2016). Many Muslim immigrants acknowledge that they themselves also need to do more to engage with wider society, to overcome the obstacles and difficulties that they face and to take greater responsibility for integration. However, the atmosphere of religious prejudice and distrust in the form of Islamophobia that surrounds Muslims places them in a quandary: should they choose to retreat into their “own” communities, and even to take steps to become less “visibly Muslim” or do they just need to do more to engage with wider society?

To withdraw from wider social participation implies adopting isolationist practices and generally leading “parallel lives” where Muslim minorities insist on retaining their separate cultural traditions, which are, to some extent, responsible for the mental confinement of their home countries. An example is honor killings, which may be an accepted custom in some countries of origin, but represents a challenge, particularly for human rights. There is therefore a danger that Muslim communities coming from non-liberal cultures will impose their culture of origin on the majority society. Failures to fully integrate into mainstream society may even make some Muslims more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. In doing so, Muslims would offer Islamophobic discourse the opportunity to characterize them as outsiders and self-segregating, and as a result the problem of non-integration is seen to rest with Muslims themselves (Zempi and Chakraborti 2014). To avoid falling into the many traps that populist right-wing parties
are setting, Muslims should instead do the opposite by initiating dialogue and speaking out in the media to dispel Islamophobic stereotypes and negative attitudes. However, engagement and participation also need encouragement and support from mainstream society that needs to do more to accommodate diversity and remove barriers to integration, such as Islamophobia—the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims, and matters pertaining to them.

Selective research, media sensationalism, and irresponsible politicians all contribute to Islamophobia, which increases fear of engagement and contributes to a lack of shared experiences between Muslims and non-Muslims, with little opportunity for the emergence of shared values (Zempi and Chakraborti 2015). The hypothesis the present study puts forward is that Muslims cannot easily engage in institutions that are perceived to be discriminatory and that transformation within segregated areas with cultural insularity (reactionary traditionalism, retreat into religious sub-sects, patriarchal attitudes, taboos, and so on) will become much easier once the climate of Islamophobia is lifted. The first section of this paper provides a comparison between Muslim and Western taboo topics and how they are reflected in daily life in Muslim and Western societies. The second section examines to what extent Muslim immigrants carry their culture with them, including taboos, and to what extent they acquire the culture of their new home. After identifying the potentials and also the obstacles on the way to an inclusive society, I will finally propose an integration framework as a two-way process that is not only sensitive to taboos but also suitable for solving integration challenges faced by Western societies.

Although there is substantial literature on the phenomenon of taboos, little has been written on why Muslim immigrants may, under certain circumstances, which will be illustrated in the following sections, maintain cultural (religious) practices, such as taboos, that are heavily marked by their culture of origin when settling in a new culture and environment. So far, no attempt has been made to respond to this question by giving an overall picture of the Muslim communities in Western societies, where deep-rooted values and taboos seem to persist and flourish. With a specific emphasis on the relevance of taboos to integration, therefore, this paper attempts to make a start in supplying this missing focus.

**A COMPARISON BETWEEN ARAB-ISLAMIC AND WESTERN TABOO TOPICS AND THEIR REFLECTION IN DAILY LIFE**

A taboo is something a culture considers forbidden. Every culture has them, and they certainly do not need to be religious in nature. Religions have their own set of taboos. Offending the gods or God is the most obvious. Many taboos in the Christian religion come from the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses. Adultery, murder, stealing, and worshipping another supreme being, all come from there. These are also considered “taboo” in many other religions and cultures. So taboos are activities that are forbidden or sacred based on religious beliefs or morals. However, an act may be taboo in one culture, but not in another depending on the role of religion in shaping culture in that society. For example, homosexuality and incest are inherently taboo for those literally following the Christian Bible, but not for general believers. To clarify this point, let us first concentrate on the phenomenon of incest.

Incest is one of the most common taboos across cultures. Incest trials usually involve a father’s abuse of an under-age daughter, which is punishable under the law of abusing minors. But in cases of incest between two consenting partners like Susan K. and Patrick S. there is no victim to be protected (Hipp 2008). The couple’s case was controversial and it prompted a heated debate in the German media. Patrick S. and Susan K. are brother and sister; they are lovers; they now have four children; but they are an incestuous couple. Patrick S. was convicted
of incest in 2008 and spent three years in prison because incest is a criminal offence in Germany. The archaic word for such behavior is Blutschande, which means sex between people who are related through blood, the modern term from the 19th century is incest, whereas the German penal code speaks of sexual intercourse between natural siblings. Sex between close relatives was and is still a taboo and hence a criminal offence; however, the formal justification from a legal point of view points to the fact that medical research has shown that there is a higher risk of genetic abnormalities when close relatives have a child together.

So what matters is the fact that children of incest are at greater risk of disorders and that incestuous relations therefore have consequences for “illegitimate” children as well as an effect on family and society as a whole, which is not good for the future of the country. This is the formal justification from a legal point of view. However, the argument that incest represents transgression against the religious and moral norms is becoming a minor matter and irrelevant (cf. Bouchara 2009, 118–19). This is quite impossible to imagine in Arab-Islamic countries where people most often attempt to avoid breaking their culture’s taboos because of the stigma involved with challenging social or religious expectations.1 In certain Muslim families, the act of incest is considered horrifying or unthinkable, and transgressors may be put to death or expelled from the society or the community. In contrast, scientific explanations have commonly replaced religious beliefs in technologically advanced societies, and religious sanctions have been replaced by legal penalties and concerns about genetic harm to progeny, which means that the role of religion in regulating and influencing social behavior has substantially decreased in the West.2

It is true that the process of modernization has an impact on the role of religion in Western societies where institutional forms of religion have lost their social significance. Religion has changed its shape. It has become a more private concern, and this tendency varies immensely in different societies in the West. That is why we need, as van der Veer (1995) rightly observes, to pay attention to the important process of state formation in order to understand the shifting place of religious institutions: “The gradual intrusion of an activist state in all spheres of social life fundamentally transforms an earlier dependence on religious institutions into one on state institutions” (van der Veer 1995, 8).

Cultural differences in dealing with taboos also apply to so-called illegitimate children or out of wedlock pregnancy. In the West, it seems today that there is no longer a stigma of having a child out of wedlock; it is no longer a taboo. This not only reflects the fact that having a child out of wedlock is more acceptable in society, but also reflects the escalating number of individuals choosing to put off marriage or live together without getting married. After all, what matters most are financial obligations towards the child. In fact, the frequency of births outside of marriage has resulted in a shifting perception of “illegitimacy.” Even language is being overhauled to reflect a de-stigmatized view of these births. In many countries, where such births constitute a significant percentage of total births, the term “illegitimate” has been replaced by “natural birth” and “out of wedlock.” Why this substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant? “Out of wedlock” is indeed a euphemism which replaces “illegitimate” because the latter is considered harsh and suggests something unpleasant and embarrassing. Euphemisms are therefore used to avoid taboo words which may be seen as offensive or disturbing to the addressee.

While births outside marriage are considered acceptable in Western societies, in most Arab-Islamic countries they remain highly stigmatized. Women may even become victims of so-called honor killings, although these pregnancies are sometimes the result of sexual abuse. In Arab-Islamic countries facing military conflicts such as Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Somalia, and The Chechen Republic, the increasing incidence of rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and
forced marriage has led to additional “unwanted” pregnancies. From a purely humanistic point of view, these children are not responsible for the actions of their parents. However, the mentality of tribal society not only stigmatizes orphans but also reserves a special brand of discrimination against abandoned illegitimate children. These infants are often identified as “anonymous babies” or “pickup babies.” Those terms stigmatize the children and contribute to their isolation and lead those children to perceive themselves as sinners, as they ask questions about why society is treating them as responsible for a sin they have not committed. The reaction is that children at a certain age start to look down on society and the miserable situation in orphanages in Arab-Islamic countries increases the risk that a child, and particularly boys, will run away and may become delinquent and subsequently a criminal. Some may even decide to commit suicide to avoid public ridicule. By the way, it is also taboo to commit suicide, and it is viewed as a disgrace to the family, but in this case we cannot speak of a shame on the family because the victim has no family anyway.

So while it may be argued that taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behavior of individuals and the community towards achieving a sustainable social order and moral rectitude, once these taboos are violated they are kept secret, and may have catastrophic consequences, such as poverty, criminality, and suicide. In fact, violations of taboos are always seen as moral transgressions, but we pay attention neither to the reasons nor to the consequences of such transgressions in Arab-Islamic countries. In this respect, it also seems that we are selective when it comes to defining what is taboo and what it is not. The moral hypocrisy is especially outrageous in countries where a certain behavior is not only strictly forbidden but also punished, while at the same time the lack of democracy and freedom and the bad corruption people are suffering from at all levels are not considered taboos. Money and power are all under the control of very few people and families, and this situation is not taboo but is taken for granted. The question to ask is: “What are the social or religious reasons for taboos. What function do they serve?” Of course, there are many different taboos, and it is unwise to assume they all have the same function. But one major function taboos do fulfil in Arab-Islamic countries is social control, to maintain the status quo and validate the authority of the ruling classes (cf. Holden 2001, 6).

Taboos, of course, evolve and change: most Western societies are more relaxed about taboo transgressions than they were, say, in the 19th century; in an age of increasing secularization, a similar shift in social attitudes is also required in traditional Muslim societies. Most attempts to reduce, for instance, illegitimacy rates in Arabic countries seem to focus on hypocritically invigorating religious teachings. This is an impractical approach that does not address the conditions and lived experiences of “illegitimacy.” We need civic, not only religious, solutions to this problem, but we need first of all to find the energy to renew and reform by recognizing the validity of the other’s criticism and self-criticism.

To what extent do immigrants carry their culture with them, and to what extent do they acquire the culture of their new home? The answer not only has important political implications, it also helps us identify the potentials and also the obstacles on the way to an inclusive society.

MUSLIM INTEGRATION INTO WESTERN CULTURES: BETWEEN ORIGINS AND DESTINATION

One of the most striking developments in the modern era of globalization is the rapid flow of people across national borders. The rapid settlement of Muslim immigrants in European societies, in particular, has raised important challenges for how European policymakers manage cultural diversity, maintain social cohesion, and accommodate minorities. Recent events, such as
the flow of asylum seekers, have intensified concerns about the integration of Muslim populations. In this respect, two categories of society may be classified according to theories about the impact of growing social diversity in Western nations: Origins (defined as Islamic Countries of Origin for Muslim immigrants) and Destinations (defined as Western Countries of Destination for Muslim immigrants). Using this framework, it has been demonstrated that, on average, the basic social values of Muslim immigrants fall roughly mid-way between those prevailing in their country of origin and their country of destination (cf. Inglehart and Pippa 2012, 228). Accordingly, Muslim immigrants do not move to Western countries with rigidly fixed attitudes; instead, they gradually absorb much of the host culture, as assimilation theories suggest.

However, there are still immigrant populations living, for instance, in Rotterdam, Bradford, Paris, and Berlin, which are still continuing to reflect the values learnt through primary socialization in their countries of origin. These populations include even third and fourth-generation Muslims, living in isolated urban communities. They are becoming alienated from democratic societies and may be developing closer sympathies with radical groups. For some observers, “disaffected Muslims” in France, the UK, the Netherlands or Germany are seeking to create a society entirely separate from the mainstream (e.g., Bawer 2006; Murray 2017). When it comes to taboo transgression within these circles, it may happen that people resort to the norms and values of their countries of origin, as is the case with honor killing or shame killing.

The concept of (family) honor is socially embedded in Muslim communities, especially in rural areas. Killing one’s wife or sister for tarnishing her honor or that of her family has not received approval from any Islamic scholar of any note, in either the medieval or the modern era. Many Muslim commentators and organizations condemn honor killings as an un-Islamic cultural practice, and there is nothing in the Quran that permits honor killings. The root of honor killings is centuries old and dates back to the Pre-Islamic era called Jahiliyah (Time of Ignorance before the prophet Mohammed). During that time, men were encouraged to bury their infant daughters alive to avoid the possibility that they might dishonor the family. The following religious scriptures unequivocally declare Islam’s condemnation of such evil practice of female killing: “When the female (infant) buried alive is questioned for what crime she was killed” (Quran chapter 81, verses 8–9). Therefore, on the Day of Judgement, the female infant will be asked what sin she committed that caused her to be murdered. This will be a means of frightening her murderer. The Quran further condemns these murders in such verses as: “You shall not kill your children for fear of want . . . To kill them is a grievous sin.” Although the Quran called for an end to the practice of honor killings, the practice has grown and spread throughout the Muslim world due to prevailing old tribal concepts of honor and cultural norms; it is, therefore, “these characteristics, rather than religious beliefs or doctrine, which have provided an environment conducive for the occurrence of honour killings” (Doğan 2011, 401).

The family is viewed in Arab-Islamic societies as the main source of honor, and the community highly values the relationship between honor and the family. Acts by family members, which may be considered inappropriate are seen as bringing shame on the family in the eyes of the community. Such acts often include female behaviors that are related to sex outside marriage or the way of dressing. The family loses face in the community, and may be shunned by relatives. The only way the shame can be erased is through a killing. The cultures in which honor killings take place are usually considered “collectivist cultures,” where the family is more important than the individual, and individualistic autonomy is seen as a threat to the collective family and its honor. The concept of honor, combined with the concept of shame, makes a person “sensitive to the judgements of others” (Campbell 1992, 131). That is why many perpetrators in Turkey who have committed and have been found guilty of murder committed in the name of honor made an oblique reference to such social determinants by using expressions
such as “I had no choice,” “it was not in my hands,” “there was no other remedy,” “I sacrificed myself for my family, and I would do it again if I met the same situation” (Doğan 2014, 17).

It should not be assumed that when people migrate to Europe, they only bring their traditional clothes and food with them; they also bring their own values, traditions, and culture. So, honor-based violence—committed to “protect” the so-called honor of a family or community—does not only happen in the non-Western world. The sad reality is that honor-based violence does happen and continues to occur in the West. For instance, many people migrated to the UK in the early 1950s from Pakistan, and it is well known that values held by Pakistani families are firmly established in immigrant families in the UK, even several generations down the line. In 2016 the news magazine Newsweek reported the murder of the teenage girl Shafilea Ahmed, killed by her parents, Iftikhar and Farzana Ahmed, for supposedly bringing shame on her conservative Pakistani family (cf. Tufayel 2016). Likewise, in 2005 the German news magazine Der Spiegel reported the following: “In the past four months, six Muslim women living in Berlin were killed by family members. Their crime? Trying to break free and live Western lifestyles.” The article went on to cover the case of a Turkish-Kurdish woman who was killed by her brother for not staying with the husband she was forced to marry, and of “living like a German” (cf. Biehl 2005). Forced marriage and honor killing are two different, distinct topics. They often occur separately and are not necessarily linked with one another. However, both seem to be a consequence of cultural and social circumstances, and the attempt to force someone into marriage can result in honor killing (cf. Robbers 2008).

Due to growing immigration from South Asia and the Middle East, countries in the West are increasingly confronted with the phenomenon of honor crime. Many women in Western society have indeed been murdered in the name of honor due to the persistence of traditional and patriarchal ideologies within immigrant communities. As dishonor and disgrace fall upon a traditional family as a catastrophe, due to the perceived inappropriate behaviors of their women or daughters, the killing becomes the most effective practice to punish the “crime” and restore dignity, whether in the host country or the country of origin. Certainly far worse is the community’s moral support which tends to go to the perpetrator of an honor crime, in the belief that he simply did his duty. These crimes are misleadingly called “honor killings,” and this kind of language runs the risk of unwillingly supporting the perpetrators, because it might make them believe that they are truly acting in the name of honor.

The use of cultural defense as a justification for murder in the name of protecting family honor should, however, be criticized. This way of reasoning, which portrays women not as victims but as transgressors against traditional cultures, views the crime through the eyes of the perpetrator instead of the victim, as it should. In this case, the word “honor” can carry an almost positive connotation that seems to serve as a justification for the perpetrators to “seek mitigation on the ground that the murder was committed as a consequence of protecting family honour” (Barbuzzi and Singh 2018). Acts that have nothing to do with honor but rather with misogyny are found in some deeply patriarchal circles that still limit women’s freedom according to old tribal concepts of honor. Indeed, if a male relative loses supremacy and control over his woman, this “implies a loss of masculinity that is more costly to the man than woman’s life” (ibid.). Hence, these killings are not about honor; they are rather about the fear of losing power and control of women in patriarchal communities. In other words, these are crimes driven by the desire to control.

As stated above, many Muslim immigrants, and especially older persons, originate from rural backgrounds, where common concepts of honor and vengeance conflict with the values in the West (Abbas 2011, 17). In view of this, Idriss (2011) explains that the presence of honor-based violence in Western societies may have its roots in second-generation disagreement with
the customs of the older generation: “Second-generation migrants who have become more ‘Westernized’ may provoke the first generation to take physical action in order to ‘remedy’ the perceived shame created by their apparent transgressions” (Idriss 2011, 3). The so-called “honor killing” is in fact not Islamic, but rather related to tribal custom. However, Western media frequently depict “honor killings,” to some extent falsely, as associated to religion and Muslim tradition by describing honor killing, for instance in both the Netherlands and Germany, “as a form of violence against women rooted in Islam, ethnicity or national origin, and portraying religion, ethnicity, and national origin as homogenous, unitary, and/or a-historical forces that by definition lead to gender inequality” (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009, 234). “Honor killings” are therefore misleadingly described as linked to Islam as well as to backward cultures. More specifically and as illustrated in her study “(Mis) Representing the ‘Other’: ‘Honour Killing’ in the British Press,” Chafai (2013) explores how the phenomenon of “honor killing” is reported in British newspapers by looking at the different linguistic and discursive strategies used in the news coverage. She concludes:

Implicitly or explicitly, killing in the name of honour, in particular, is seen as excused by Islam as if religion urges the performance of such practices with the aim of controlling the behaviour of women in the family. On the whole, the general tone adopted by the press suggests that religion or religious tradition is commonly used to legitimise any violence or negative attitude or action carried out by Muslims. However . . . sociological interpretations are barely represented in the news reports as a means of raising awareness among audiences about such a social problem.

(Chafai 2013, 128)

Western majority members are thus likely to gain their impressions of Muslims from the discourse about them in the media. Such negative depictions and descriptions—whether adopted consciously or unconsciously—which the media convey about Muslim immigrants contribute to the reinforcement and reproduction of prejudice and stereotyping against Muslim immigrants. In doing so, the media plays a major role in promoting Islamophobia across the world by portraying Islam and Muslims as a threat to Western security and values (Poole and Richardson 2010). Negative representations of Muslims have even been observed across American and European media outlets, including cable news, newspapers, television, movies, and video games. The so-called risk of Muslim immigrants has been hyped throughout by the media channels to the extent that now Westerners see Muslims only in the context of somebody who is an adversary of the democratic world order and modernization, a fact which has led many to feel that the ‘clash of civilizations’ hypothesis was perpetuated by the media (Ahmad 2006, 961).

Consequently, such Islamophobic media coverage of Islam may push the immigrant group to perceive that the culture of their host country is a threat to their values because both cultures are based on different norms. What is even worse is that the pressure of the media’s messages, which are almost always Islamophobic, may cause a sense of cultural inferiority even in young Muslims and may instill in them a lack of confidence and of a sense of belonging. Some become more extremely attached to their parents’ way of life and loyal to the traditions of their ancestors by rejecting the values of the host country. Others, unfortunately, may look to find their sense of identity in extremist groups because they are distressed by the negative representation of their religion within mainstream Western media. By distancing themselves against their will from mainstream culture, Muslim immigrants are thus falsely considered by the indigenous population as unable to integrate within the rest of society and the whole blame of Muslims’ integration failure is put on Muslims themselves.
Against this background, the fact that such behaviors from both parts of society may generate conflict and tension between minority and majority societies, seems to influence processes of inclusion. Having described and identified the potentials and also the obstacles on the way to an inclusive society, my objective now is to develop perspectives for an integration framework that is sensitive not only to taboos, such as honor killing, but also suitable for solving integration challenges faced by European countries. In the following section, the potential to foster successful integration in an inclusive society will be discussed; here, integration—in accordance with the apparent mainstreaming of this perspective throughout Europe—is described as “a dynamic two-way process” characterized by mutual adaptation between immigrants and the majority population to create a new, intercultural basis for mutual identification and solidarity (cf. Zapata-Barrero and Gropas 2012).

THE PROPOSAL: INTEGRATION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS

It is certainly quite normal that, during the first decades of their new presence in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, Muslims, who came to fill labor shortages, did not want to settle forever in Western countries and should have sought principally to protect themselves; they had no choice, and it was as much about the survival of their religious identity as about the preservation of their culture rather than integration into this “unfamiliar” European environment. For the most part, this first generation came from far poorer developing societies characterized by lower levels of education and literacy, and the immigrants maintained religious practices that remained heavily marked by their culture of origin, whether Indo-Pakistani, North African, or Turkish. But most of these original immigrants never left. Instead, they started building their own parallel worlds in poor city outskirts, “such as the population of Turkish guest workers in Berlin, Bremen and Frankfurt; the Moroccan, Turk and Sudanese communities in Rotterdam; Franco-Maghrebis in Marseilles; and Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in the East End of London, Bradford, or Leicester” (Inglehart and Pippa 2012, 232).

Thus, for a long while, they remained no more than temporary guests, making no visible impression in the public sphere. And still, they encountered negative stereotypes, racism, and discrimination, and these impelled them even more to be almost invisible (Relevy 2015, 22). Over the years, the parents’ dream of going home faded and the European Muslim communities went from invisible to visible. Their children were born in Europe, became fluent in their national language, and better educated than their elders, who were not given a fair chance to integrate into society because they lacked the tools to acquire the language and learn the European ways of life. It is exactly this increased visibility of Muslims and their religious symbols which has created such a climate of mutual suspicion between Muslims and mainstream European societies. As a result, there is an increasing fear and opposition to European Muslims, who have become a dominant political discourse for right-wing political parties. Unless there is an effort by Muslim immigrants to better integrate into European societies and by European societies to show openness, tensions may become worrisome. Such an effort is extremely demanding and, as we shall see, it compels immigrant Muslims, as free citizens under the rule of the law, to find solutions and alternatives to the problems of society and to move from integration to contribution, consequently, dampening the appeal of the Islamophobic discourse. However, in order for immigrant Muslims to contribute and to be an added value in European societies, a large part of the responsibility is placed in their hands.

Following Ramadan (2010, 85–9), the idea of integration and contribution mainly involves three necessary factors or responsibilities required for a successful integration of Muslim
immigrants. The ability to speak the local language, the respect of the law, and the sentiment of loyalty towards the country in which they reside.

So, the first responsibility is language, which means that Muslim immigrants must be proficient in the language of the country where they reside and not just in their language of origin. German Muslims, for instance, are therefore expected to have a good command of the German language in order to really integrate and to get a sense of the culture from within. To have a command of the grammar is good. It means that one could, for instance, use the nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive appropriately. If Muslims could communicate effectively in different social and cultural situations, especially when discussing religion and politics, this would in fact help to increase understanding and avoid conflicts that may arise in intercultural communication. When we teach a language, we must therefore teach the corresponding cultural paradigm in which it exists by looking at culture as a dimension of integration. Taboos are a key element of every culture; hence, we must teach them too.8

The second criterion Muslims should fulfill in order to be really integrated and to reform the society for the better is to abide by the law. As long as European Muslims are not asked to act against their conscience and their Islamic principles, the legal framework for the European citizens is what they are expected to respect. However, immigrants carry their culture with them, including taboos and breaking one’s family’s taboos may result in committing crimes. Abuses by private actors such as honor killings are crimes under the domestic laws of the country immigrant Muslims are living in. Honor killings self-evidently violate the right to life. Such a practice should therefore be eradicated by seeking dialogue with groups that try to justify honor killings with reference to cultural or religious norms. “Religion” cannot not be invoked as an excuse for the crime of the honor killing of women, and no “culture” has the right to kill and harm women based on their perceptions of morality or honor. Religious principles should not be confused with the culture of origin. In fact, the cultural dimension of religion should be criticized; Muslims are not supposed to be Arab Muslims, Asian Muslims, African Muslims, or Turkish Muslims in Europe, but they are expected as Muslims to remain Muslims but to take from the surrounding culture everything which is right and the respect of the law is something which is right and essential. That is why they should be consistent not to put religious morality and religious traditions over civil law.

The third responsibility is about the sentiment of loyalty towards the country in which immigrant Muslims live. However, loyalty is not blind support of the nation, and it is not a statement that “you are with us or against us.” Striving for the best for his or her country, a citizen, whether Muslim or not, must be able to criticize a government’s policies without having his or her loyalty be questioned, which in consequence deepens one’s sense of belonging. But there are, of course, exceptions. In certain situations we have to acknowledge that our heart goes in one direction, and our involvement in another; this happens, for instance, in sport: What’s the problem when Argentina or Brazil plays against Germany, and people are rooting for Argentina or Brazil? Does it mean that they are less German? Here we should be careful not to say: “If you are supporting another team, you are not loyal to your country.” This is a narrower understanding of being loyal. So to be really loyal means critically loyal. I am a citizen when I am saying “yes” when it is right, and I can be critical when I think it is wrong.

Guided by these three L’s (language, law, and loyalty), Muslims can achieve a better understanding of and involvement in their societies and hence progress towards an effective integration. This was not the case 50 years ago because, as I have already mentioned, immigrant Muslims were really very modest and low-profile workers coming to try to survive in Europe. Today, however, Muslims are a highly visible constituency in most European countries. The growing visibility of Muslims and their new cultural and religious presence has led
to an identity crisis by disturbing the very essence of what has been perceived for centuries as a homogenous national identity. European countries that used to be relatively homogeneous in their cultural heritage, historical traditions, ethnic composition, language, lifestyles, and religious faith—such as Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden—have become far more socially diverse. Diversity and cultural differences, however, are a potential fault line that demagogues can exploit to inflame hatred between groups. Now there is a discourse highlighting tensions between national identity and the growing presence of Muslims, which is reflected in the current fear of Islam in today’s Western media as well as in public opinion. This kind of discourse is used mainly by right-wing populism as the sole explanation for the socio-economic problems that all European societies are currently facing. Populist discourse is thus nurturing a sense of fear and phobia by insinuating that Europe is under siege, inciting anxiety associated with the diminution of the identity of a European nation, and suggesting that “others” are silently colonizing European countries. We can see the rise of this trend throughout the West, where people, mostly from the Islamic world, are targeted as undesirable foreigners rather than residents and citizens.

According to Wodak (2015), there are discursive strategies and linguistic features characterizing right-wing populism in Europe nowadays such as the construction of inclusion and exclusion by means of blaming and scapegoating certain groups or people (such as Muslims or Turks) or presenting oneself as a savior for “the people.” More precisely, Wodak convincingly criticizes that

> [a]ll right-wing populist parties instrumentalize some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority as a *scapegoat* for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as dangerous and a threat “to us,” to “our” nation; this phenomenon manifests itself as a “politics of fear”; and all right-wing populist parties seem to endorse what can be recognized as the “arrogance of ignorance”; appeals to common-sense and anti-intellectualism mark a return to pre-modernist or pre-Enlightenment thinking.

(Wodak 2015, 2)

It is therefore important to distinguish between the politics of fear and the legitimate fears of the public. After the terrorist attacks around the world and the terrible loss of life of innocent people, one has reason to be worried. This is human nature. However, we need to understand that the purpose of terrorism is to frighten people and to make all of us believe that we are in imminent danger. Terrorism is more a political and psychological weapon than a true military strategy. Right-wing populist parties are aware of this and their psychological manipulation of widespread public fear has resulted in the instrumentalization of fear in order to gain public support.

The proliferation of anti-Muslim rhetoric by the right-wing extremist parties has led to an atmosphere of fear towards Muslims by driving people apart and destroying social trust in countries where Muslims are seen as a separate ethnic group or viewed as foreign, thus serving another purpose of terrorism which is to recruit Muslim immigrants who feel culturally homeless and lack a sense of belonging. We should bear in mind that the outcome of social exclusion, or social marginalization, is that affected individuals or communities are prevented from participating fully in the life of the society in which they live. This may result in experiences of discrimination that make the situation worse and lead to greater support for radicalism, which promises a sense of identity and purpose in life. Those most susceptible to radical messages are the young people, who perceive themselves to be politically and/or economically
marginalized and are demoralized by a pervasive sense of purposelessness and lack of hope in the future.

In recent years, the threat of violent Muslim extremists emerging within Western countries has grown. Terrorist organizations are recruiting Muslims in the United States and Europe via social media. Yet, we know little about the factors that would drive Muslim immigrants in a Western country to heed this call. Religion is sometimes used to legitimize personal and collective frustrations and justify violent ideologies. However, there is strong evidence (e.g., Capell and Sahliyeh 2007; Burgat and Arqué 2017) suggesting that religion is not the primary motivator for joining violent extremists. Recent studies (e.g., Olsson 2014) have shown that some people who join violent extremist movements are on a quest for significance, a sense that their lives have purpose and meaning. They want to generate this sense of worth in themselves and appear worthy in the eyes of others. Social exclusion together with humiliation and perceived maltreatment by society can cause people to feel a loss of self-worth. As a result, such individuals may be attracted to radical opportunities to restore a sense of self-worth and clear identity.

Helping Muslims become more integrated into and accepted by society and supporting their efforts to preserve aspects of their own culture could therefore be steps that help prevent such radicalization. If policymakers truly seek to prevent radicalization among Muslim immigrants, they should discourage discrimination and promote policies that allow Muslims to more effectively integrate into their new home and root culture identities. When public figures and right-wing extremists speak out against Islam, Muslims can start to feel excluded and insecure about their place as a Muslim in Western society. Terrorist groups know this and exploit it, and if governments do not do a better job of including Muslims by protecting them against radicalization, the militant organizations will do that by producing “a discourse that legitimizes violent action as another, and even the most efficient one, way to fight against inequality, exclusion and the perceived permanence of colonial relations” (Burgat and Arqué 2017, 24).

Not surprisingly, the driving force behind the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims citizens lies to a great extent in a politics of exclusion and division instead of inclusion. When groups feel mistreated and disrespected, they close ranks and become more insular and more defensive. In order to develop a solution to this issue and to get away from the “us versus them” mentality, we should also emphasize the responsibility of Muslims in helping to build bridges of trust by cooperating with their fellow citizens. To do so, Muslims in Western societies are not only supposed to achieve the three L’s (language, law, and loyalty) but must also avoid two common negative attitudes which Ramadan (2010, 67–73) defines as “the victim mentality” (to stop behaving like victims) and “minority feeling” (the fact that Western Muslims need to consider themselves at home in Western countries). They need to avoid the victim mentality and self-marginalization that might be nurtured by this atmosphere of Islamophobia and rejection of Muslims everywhere in Western societies today. Furthermore, they should avoid identifying themselves as a minority, saying: “we don’t want to be targeted, so we will isolate ourselves” (Paulick 2011). Instead, they should do the opposite; to withdraw would not be the right reaction. Muslims must do away with the temptation to shut themselves off as an isolated minority.

Muslims in Western societies also need to pay more attention to the doubts and fears that their fellow citizens have, which also result from the way that Muslims define themselves, including their own relationship towards Islam. When Muslims settle in a new culture, they even need to reassess the way the scriptural sources (the Quran and the Sunnah) can be read, understood and implemented in a new historical context: new cultures are pushing Muslims to reassess historical readings and understandings without changing the scriptural texts. It might
be that some practices that are perceived as Islamic are in fact more cultural than religious, such as taboos that Muslim immigrants have carried and transmitted to their children. Islam is not a culture but a body of principles and values, and one should not mix up these principles with a Pakistani, Turkish, or Arabic way of living them. As stated above, the cultural dimension of religion should be criticized; today’s Muslims, both in the East and West, urgently need contemporary religious jurisprudence (fiqh), distinguishing what in the scriptures is immutable and what may be changed.

Thus, while practicing their religion, Muslims can preserve certain features of their own culture of origin. At the same time, Muslims are expected to adopt aspects of the new cultures and environments where they find themselves, which becomes a new dimension of their own identity. This approach is meant to enable Muslims in Western societies to respond to the issues and challenges of their presence in secularized societies where religious reference plays a secondary role in public life. In fact, this model of nationhood, which is a precondition to citizenship and belonging, sheds any connection to religion, particularly in the public sphere, and is ideologically secular. However, by trying to find a place of belonging within their religious community rather than in mainstream society, Muslims form parallel societies of their own where immigrants from South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa tend to prefer dealing with their family affairs with obsolete cultural practices and values brought from their homeland instead of embracing the values of their adoptive country.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, Wodak (2015, 70–96) identifies striking similarities in the propaganda of populist right-wing parties promoting fear, distinctiveness, and anti-immigration sentiments and—what is even worse—the success of the populist parties seems to influence mainstream parties in a shift to the “right”: a normalization of ever more exclusionary and racist rhetoric can be observed. This situation has driven even younger generations of Muslims, born and raised in Western societies to find a place of belonging within their religious community rather than in mainstream society.

In view of this, persisting ethnic sub-cultures in Western European societies, or even deepening divergence between minority and majority communities, seems the most likely scenario, so that immigrant populations from Muslim countries are unlikely to abandon their cultural roots when they settle in another country. Instead, deep-rooted values, such as taboos, would persist for many minority Muslim groups for many decades, or even for centuries. Therefore, in such communities, immigrants often experience a malaise when faced with anti-immigration sentiments and racist rhetoric in the host country; they withdraw into their roots to get a sense of solid ground, constricting their cultural and religious identity. That same malaise is shared by both men and women when it comes to their children’s education. Taboos are an important part of any cultural identity. Adopting an identity implies accepting the taboos and the social norms associated with this identity. In this case, the family, followed by the community, would be the principal agent of socialization and play the predominant role in transmitting the social and cultural norms of the community of origin, especially in neighborhoods with a strong concentration of one ethnic group.

In this respect, one of the mechanisms that work to maintain the social pressures exerted in immigrant communities is public scrutiny and gossip. Fear of gossip may in fact be an effective barrier that restricts one’s freedom (Boudjak 2007, 60–1). The community claims the right to act as judge and jury, which is particularly stifling in places where everyone knows everyone else. This control mechanism has also been observed in immigrant communities in
the West, such as Québec (cf. Geadah et al. 2013, 34–40). The collective dimension of cultural practices and values can take precedence over its individual dimension, and even open-minded parents can in immigrant communities be driven to adopt more rigid attitudes toward their children for fear of being negatively judged and shunned by their community. This illustrates the fact that even in an immigrant context, social pressure can play a decisive role in reinforcing the norms dictated by taboos. It also shows that a behavior accepted and tolerated by the parents can be dishonoring, if it is revealed publicly.

More effective integration policies can help to combat living conditions that facilitate the transmission of old cultural values and traditional-patriarchal family structures from generation to generation, by providing appropriate housing facilities, urban planning law to counteract ghetto-like living conditions, and education programs for immigrants. What is also needed is to get into contact with immigrants and with those who exercise influence over them. Not only the perpetrators, for instance, of “honor” killings, must be convinced that what they do is wrong, but families and communities as well because they also contribute to covering up the perpetrator’s homicide by maintaining their silence and their support for honor killing as a culturally acceptable and “heroic” act. However, immigrants will often need counselors from within their own community; counselors should be properly trained and be aware of issues and cultural values, such as taboos and the dangers of approaching immigrant families without their consent. Muslim immigrants need to be able to talk matters through with someone who understands their cultural background, and who also knows the legal and practical remedies available to them. In approaching dialogues and debates concerning Muslims in Europe, more deliberate attention to the portrayal of this population is therefore needed in order to avoid falling into the same patterns of stigmatizing Muslims throughout Europe. The answers to many socio-economic problems in Europe given by populist right-wing parties are oriented toward nostalgic, parochial, and traditional values, “trying to turn back the wheel of history and social development” (Wodak 2015, 183). Public and institutional hostility to Muslims, however, restricts the scope of their participation in social, economic, political, and cultural life. How can we break this deadlock?

It follows from the above considerations that European Muslims need, on the one hand, to achieve the above mentioned three L’s (language, law and loyalty) and to avoid the two common negative attitudes, namely “the victim mentality” and “minority feeling.” But even more important for the building of strong relations with “Others” and spreading awareness and correct knowledge, intolerance should not be confronted with anger, and one should be proactive, rather than reactive: when coming to people who are believers of other faiths, instead of shouting out the differences, Muslims should emphasize the agreements, similarities, and commonalities conducive to a climate of peaceful coexistence. Being active citizens by trying to change media perceptions through positive messages and to reach out to mainstream media, rather than being on the defensive, will help to further engage non-Muslims and lead them away from Islamophobic tendencies (Mirhosseini and Rouzbeh 2015, 1).

On the other hand, there should be an increasing focus on the role of the receiving society for achieving a higher degree of integration of Muslim immigrants. Integrating Muslim immigrants, i.e., allowing them to participate in the host society at the same level as natives, is an active, not a passive, process that involves two parties, the host society and Muslim immigrants, working together to build a cohesive society. According to Gijsberts and Dagevos (2007), socio-cultural integration depends on the extent to which ethnic minority groups become part of the receiving society or remain distinct. More precisely, socio-cultural integration occurs, not only through immigrants’ endeavors to learn a new language and culture but also through the articulation or interaction with the host society and their sense of belonging
as well as the attitudes of the host society. Fostering contact between natives and immigrants would decrease intergroup prejudices, anxieties, and perceived threats, which can pave the way for successful integration as a two-way process. In sum, if immigrant Muslims, as (Relevy 2015) argues, were able to live as citizens with equal rights and feel an integral part of the surrounding society, “the Islamic element of their identity might not be as important . . . and they would no longer feel the need to deepen and highlight their ethnicity and to differentiate themselves from the societies around them” (Relevy 2015, 51).

A greater understanding is required about Muslim immigrants; this is why we need to elaborate on the points raised in this study and other related issues. In light of the events in Europe as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis and the rush of refugees into Europe, the necessity still exists for increased involvement by Europeans with people from Muslim societies. This study has highlighted specific concerns for Western societies, which are welcoming and integrating Muslim immigrants and refugees. In particular, the present paper can aid Europeans (politicians, teachers, advisors, government agencies responsible for refugee integration, etc.) to more effectively understand the cultural practices, such as the taboos of Muslim immigrants. This study has been a modest step in that direction and invites further exploration.

ENDNOTES

1 Assuming that all individual members of a certain culture think, believe and behave exactly alike can, however, result in stereotyping and an insensitive approach. I should therefore make it clear that in different Islamic societies and social groups, the norms and ideologies are very different. Besides, there are communities in Arab countries to this day that are regarded as ethnically and linguistically Arabic but adhere to other ancient Christian communions, such as the Coptic Orthodox in Egypt and the Maronite Catholic in Lebanon. So, Arabs are an ethno-linguistic group of people, most of whom are Muslim in religion but many of whom are not. Likewise, the largest Muslim populations in the world are all in non-Arabic speaking countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, among others.

2 It should be noted that I am not suggesting here that all countries in the West are homogeneous and that they share the same culture. Because of different history, geography, ideology, economics, politics, culture, language, lifestyle, social customs, and classes, etc., people in different parts of the West, especially those in the North (Britain and Germany, for instance) and those in the South (Spain and Greece, for instance) do differ profoundly in their cultural patterns and orientation.

3 Throughout this study, I will be referring mainly to (Western) Europe because, first, it was Europe which resorted to Muslim immigrants after the Second World to offset labour shortages, not the US. Second, as Leiken (2012, 104) argues, unlike the US, where Muslim immigrants are geographically diffuse, ethnically fragmented, and generally well off, in Europe many of its immigrants live in societies wholly separate from those of the host countries. Third, as Leiken points out, “Most European Muslims are descendants of illiterate labor migrants from rural regions, while American Muslims began to arrive in the country as college students” (ibid.). Muslim immigrants in Europe thus seem to retain powerful attachments to their native cultures because Europe is, at most, a two to four-hour flight from their home countries. And, finally, asylum seekers and refugees, whose numbers have substantially increased in the last years, have poured from neighboring Muslim countries into Europe, not into the US or Canada. These factors, among others, significantly differentiate Muslim immigration to Europe from the Muslim expatriation in the USA and explain, to a certain extent, why Islam and Muslims are rather a major concern in Europe.

4 The Quran has 114 surahs, “chapters” of varying length, with each surah consisting of a number of verses, ayaat.
See Triandis (1990) for a detailed discussion of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions “individualism vs. collectivism” (Hofstede 1980).

The perception that a man’s honor is dependent on the proper behavior of female relatives is not only common in Arab-Islamic societies but is also found in Western societies such as Spain, Greece, and Italy. For a detailed discussion of why the concept of honor killing has increasingly become associated with Muslim societies in general see Doğan (2011).

So far we have dealt only with incest and honor killing or shame killing. When it comes to taboo transgression within Muslim family circles, there are other cultural practices associated with taboos that are also problematic, such as divorce, parallel justice, forced marriage etc. Unfortunately, it is not possible within the scope of this paper to discuss all these issues. However, the issue of honor killing will be returned to below when discussing the social determinants and characteristics of Muslim communities and the environment conducive to the transmission of the values and ideas from generation to generation.

For an analysis of the impact of religion on taboos and the issue of taboo-based misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication, especially between Arabs and Germans, see Bouchara (2009, 2018).

Sunnah is the way of life prescribed as normative for Muslims on the basis of the teachings and practices of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and interpretations of the Quran. The Sunnah is the second source of Islamic jurisprudence, the first being the Quran.

REFERENCES


