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Cultural Identity and the Radical Islamic Internet in the Muslim Diaspora

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Introduction

An estimated 26 million Muslims live in Europe (Pew Research Center, 2017). They all come from different countries, settled in different places and identify with different ethnic groups. Europeans, however, especially from 9/11 onwards, perceive people who happen to be Muslim first and foremost in religious terms (Buitelaar & Stock, 2016). Externally imposed labels, combined with a tendency of later generations of Muslims to identify less with their ethnic group of origin, has made the question of a "Muslim cultural identity" increasingly relevant, and some of the principal actors in the construction of said identity happen to be Radical Islamists tied to Salafism, who see ethnic divisions within the *umma* (community of believers) as inherently sinful and undesirable. The constructive efforts of Radical Islamists, combined with a demand for religious authority in the Diaspora and the advances of Information Technology, have led to the birth of a myriad of loosely interconnected websites, Twitter accounts, and Telegram channels affiliated with or connected to Radical Islam in all its various denominations. This thesis, after having attempted to provide a framework to understand cultural identity in the Muslim Diaspora, its history and a description of Diasporic space in the main European host countries will then describe the role of Internet platforms in shaping -through the use of symbolisms and aesthetic codes as well as the homogenizing power of anonymity- a new cultural identity for an imagined community of Radical Muslims, who claim authenticity and doctrinal purity while engaging in highly *hybridized* symbolic practices.

Cultural Identity in a Globalized World: Diaspora and Migrant Communities.

To properly understand how the Internet influences and structures patterns of religious belonging and the propagation of radical beliefs in the Muslim Diaspora, it is only appropriate to lay out a theoretical outlook for the real-world communities that represent the target audience of radical Islamic content online. By understanding Muslim migrant communities in Europe through the lenses of cultural identity, Diaspora and Postcolonial theory, it would be possible to analyze the problematic questions of belonging, self-identification and community that seem to influence the move of seemingly normal individuals towards increasingly radical views. To this end, the following chapter will rely on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as an inherently problematic *"becoming"* as laid out in the 1990 essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, to adapt his model of Presences to the context of the Muslim Diaspora. This process of adaptation will underline the peculiarities involved in the construction of cultural identity of Muslim migrants in Europe, focusing on the particular role of Islam in mainstream European narratives and the importance of space and location in forming a sense of rootedness and belonging. With this understanding, it will be possible to then more closely study patterns of religious participation and belonging throughout different generations of Muslim "immigrants", as well as the role of the Internet in changing and reinforcing such patterns.

Since the early 16th Century, European powers and peoples have maintained a stable presence far outside their own continent, establishing themselves in the Americas, as well as parts of Africa and Asia, through a mix of conquest, resettlement, colonial domination, and economic exploitation. The so-called "Age of Discovery" had put the Christian Europeans into contact with a world much more vast and foreign that they had imagined when Columbus and Da Gama sailed towards the edges of the "Known World". Conceptualizing a framework to understand the relationship between peoples with no common history of culture was not going to be an easy task, and the solution given by the new colonial overlords, according to the sociologist John Rex, was a reflection of their own military superiority and need for imperial expansion: having authority over the whole of colonial society, they imprinted it with their own values, and came to conceive the physical differences between colonizers and colonized as markers of an innate hierarchy of culture (Rex, 1970).

The complex interaction between the Europeans, the Africans, and the empt*ied* American continent was explored by the sociologist Stuart Hall (1990) in his study of cultural identity in the Caribbean. In his essay, titled *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall identifies three constitutive "presences" in the cultural identity of the Caribbean people: first, he outlines the features of a *"Presence Africaine"* (which he deems the *"site of the repressed"*), with its traces scattered throughout the

entirety of Caribbean existence, from the etimology of its creole words to mannerisms, art, and the physical ethnic markers of its peoples. Hall then proceeds to underline the importance of a *"Presence Europeenne"*, the imposed and interiorized gaze whose regimes of representation are forcibly imposed on the Black subject, fixing the idea of "otherness" and hierarchy in the very core of Caribbean identity through the power of colonial domination. Lastly, he explains how a third presence, *Americaine* in the widest continental sense of the word, acted as the "stage" for the *"fatal encounter"* between Europe and Africa, the New World where *"the creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated"* (Hall, 1990, p.234). The *"Presence Americaine"*, as testified by the traces of decimated native cultures still echoing through the Caribbean and beyond, is defined by displacement and diaspora, baking in the idea of movement and migration into Caribbean identity.

In a similar fashion to the Caribbean, studying Muslim cultural identity in the West "in a vacuum" of de-historicized origin myths would be reductive, if not outright inadequate to describe the particularities of a group defined by its interaction with Europe and present history. Adapting Hall's model of *presences* might therefore provide the needed nuance to comprehend the Muslim diaspora in its wider context, but such an exercise requires a proper understanding of some of the key differences between the Caribbean and the Muslim diasporic experiences.

First, any notion of a *Muslim Presence* needs to take into account the reality of the Muslim World itself, with its multitude of languages, cultures, and ethnicities. Africa too was and is to this day an incredibly diverse continent, but the experience of deportation, together with the passage of time, have severed the ties between Caribbean peoples and their ancestral cultures, rendering precise notions of ethnicity less salient in defining cultural identity. Muslim immigration in Europe, on the other hand, is much more recent, and mostly "voluntary" in nature (or at least more so than the slave trade). Even though Islam is the primary marker of identity for Muslims in Europe (Buitelaar & Stock, 2016), and increasingly so even in terms of self-identification in the second and third generations (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012) social congregations are still generally ethnicity-based, owing both to the maintenance of ties to the homeland in recent immigrant communities and the nature of Muslim immigration in Europe itself: in the cases of France and the UK (both of which maintained colonial possessions in the Muslim World) most Muslim migrants tended to come from the former colonies and protectorates of said countries; whilst the Muslim population in Germany originated in great part from bilateral accords between Turkey and the labor-starved post-World War Two German government (Ahmed, 2018).

The relative ethnic homogeneity of some immigrant communities (a plurality of British Muslims traces their origins back from the Pakistani region of Azad Kashmir, for example), combined with the diminishing ties the newer generations have to their ancestral homelands, the importance given in Islam to the *umma* (a global community of believers that knows no race nor ethnicity), and the dominant European regimes of representation, make it so that the relationship between religion and ethnicity needs to be constantly renegotiated by Muslims in Europe, thus affecting the very nature of this "Muslim Presence".

The "European Presence" in immigrant Muslim cultural identity, the *self-othering* imposed from above by the dominant culture, is analogous in origin to the *Presence Europeenne* of Caribbean identity: the values, beliefs, and cultural practices that are imposed both have their origins in Christian European culture, and it is through the filter of such canons that Muslims are read and, in part, come to read themselves. Alas, if the source of the othering is the same, its terms and characteristics are very different, reflecting the different ways in which European culture conceptualized its relationship with Africans and Muslims. Whilst the former were considered inferior savages with no culture whatsoever, used as slaves in colonial societies, European people had *themselves* been slaves in Muslim empires throughout history. Where African states seldom managed to repel European military aggression, armies of Muslims had pushed into Europe as far as Poitiers in the West and the gates of Vienna in the East. It is telling that one of the first, if not *the first* use of "European" as a collective noun comes from an 8th century account of the Battle of Poitiers, where Isidore of Beja described the clash between the "*moors*" and the "*army of the Europeans*" headed by Charles Martel (Berting, 2006). In this sense, the very notion of "European" has, although only in part, been defined *in opposition to* Islam, in a similar fashion to the construction of "Whiteness" as a category against Black peoples. If the relationship between Europe and Africa has been one of almost completely unilateral oppression, the one between Europe and the Muslim World has at times assumed the scale of (real or imagined) existential struggle, characterizing the Muslim subject as the original *other*, the seemingly eternal "enemy" against which Europeanness itself was at least partly defined.

Such a reading of the relationship between the Muslim World and Europe is, of course, an oversimplification if not considered in its wider context of centuries of peaceful trading and cultural interchange between the two; but especially in the post-9/11 era, European regimes of representation have tended to focus way more on the violent side of the relationship with Islam rather than its contributions to European philosophy and science. Through these lenses, the suspicious gaze of which has been exacerbated by two decades of War on Terror, the othering of

Muslims places them as terrorists, or otherwise civilizational enemies, rather than savages, thus producing a somewhat unique "European Presence" in Muslim cultural identity.

In the construction and reconstruction of Caribbean identity, according to Hall, a crucial role is played by what he calls *"Presence Americaine"*. The existence of this "third space", although certainly not neutral (as it was under European control), produced the conditions necessary to the emergence of a distinctively *Caribbean* identity, as cultures mixed and interacted in a land foreign to all of them, with only distant traces of the native populations echoing through colonial society (Hall, 1990).

Such a third term doesn't exist in the case of migrant Muslim communities. In Hall's words, they find themselves in the *"belly of the beast"*, shoved at the margins of European urban spaces, in former industrial neighborhoods where they first moved in search of work or in anonymous dormitory areas of the continent's metropolises. Whether in Bredford, Molenbeek, or Saint-Denis, migrant communities found themselves in a space not built for them, carving homes in what the scholar Homi K. Bhabha called *"gatherings at the edge of 'foreign' cultures"* (Bhabha, 1994). If the traces of the American natives were only distant echoes in Caribbean societies, the European Presence permeates the diasporic space of migrants not only as power (as in the case of the Caribbean), but also as territory and location. And if diaspora (whether of the African slaves, the natives, or the European colonists) assumed the characteristics of a universal experience in the Americas (Hall, 1990), Muslims in Europe are alone in their foreignness, alien presences for the native Europeans.

In *On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different*, Bhabha (1998, p.35) describes the anxious state of cultures of diversity as *"a transition where strangeness and contradiction cannot be negated and must be continually negotiated and worked through"*. In this sense, the "difference" that marks Muslims in Europe is constantly exposed and underlined by their physical proximity to the "host" population, reinforcing their "self-othering" and inevitably producing tensions with the white Christians. The sociologist Orlando Patterson described how Caribbean immigrants in the Brixton district soon entered into competition for economic resources with the native working-class population of the neighborhood, a competition mainly centered upon the scarce and poor-quality affordable housing of the area. Such a pattern was also observed in the Sparkbrook district of Birmingham, where the few Pakistani immigrants who managed to buy property would offer lower rates to renters of their own ethnic community, and consequently be forced to rent at extremely high prices to white tenants if they were to get any return on their mortgage payments (Fulcher & Scott, 2011). The extent to which such a competition exists in each of the many Muslim migrant

communities in Europe is hard to assess, but the idea that working class "native Europeans" have to compete with "newcomers" for social aid programs and housing has certainly entered popular discourse, and where legal access to housing for migrants is hard to obtain, the rise of informal and/or illegal occupations further exacerbates ethnic tensions, aided in part by sensationalistic media narratives (Giannoni, 2016).

As it has been shown, the European Presence in the construction of migrant Muslim cultural identity extends beyond power and hierarchy, structuring the very space of the diaspora: the process of negotiation it necessitates thus also applies to territory, where migrant communities attempt to "appropriate" their new homes while also adapting to the surrounding environment, opening halal butchers, cultural and recreational associations, and mosques where they can, often constrained by economic factors and negotiation with the host society and its institutions (in the case of Milan, no purpose-built mosque exists within city limits [Colaci, 2022] and the few praying halls that do exist have sprung up in former storage sites, underground parking lots, and former sporting centers).

The Muslim diaspora in Europe, and the cultural identity of its members, is thus defined and influenced by cultural "Presences" whose very nature is problematic: on one side, a Muslim Presence which, although finding its validity in the importance of religion as a marker of identity for Muslims from a European standpoint and the increasing importance of the *umma* in some members of the newer generations, must account for the inherent tension and interaction between ethnic and religious belonging; on the other, a European Presence that defines hierarchies as well as spaces, permeating the environment that Muslims exist in in a somewhat even deeper way than for the descendants of former slaves in the Caribbean.

In a way, the lumping together of Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, Pakistanis in Bredford and Egyptians in Milan is justified by their common subjection to the European Presence, a "diasporic experience" that metaphorically brings closer together groups with almost nothing else in common but their religion. The construction of a migrant Muslim cultural identity is thus in line with the definition Hall provides in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*: "*as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather - since history has intervened - 'what we have become'.*" (Hall, 1990, p.225). Here the author understands identity not as a fixed entity rooted in a common objective origin, but rather as the result of positionings - whether spontaneous, imposed, or negotiated – within *"narratives"* of the past, present and future. These narratives are oftentimes tied to political projects, as the same individual can be understood as a dangerous threat, an innocent refugee, or a righteous upholder of Islamic principles depending entirely on who is asked and what their motives are.

Muslims in the diaspora thus find their identities in a process of continuous construction and reconstruction, existing in a space that although not always foreign to them, inevitably positions *them* as foreigners. For migrants and their descendants, belonging is a uniquely complex phenomenon, not merely tied to some fixed location, but rather an array of physical spaces, memories, sensory stimuli, and imagined communities, sometimes even at odds with each other (Buitelaar & Stock, 2016), as competing narratives identify different "homes" for their subject. Especially when it comes to *national* belonging, history, institutions, and national narratives have a key role in determining what a migrant is "allowed" to call home: in the UK, with its long history of colonialism, a British identity seems to be somewhat accessible to Muslim immigrants, as it already encompasses diverse ethnicities and religions (and in this differing with the more restrictive and hardly accessible "English" identity); in Germany, a country which has no history of colonial domination over Muslim lands, a completely new framework had to develop to conceive ethnic relations with peoples far outside the traditional *Volk*; and in France, with its national narrative based on assimilationism, centralism and *laïcité*, there is little space to feel French while maintaining one's religion and ethnic ties at the same time (Ahmed, 2018).

Understanding the complex interplay of ethnicity, religion, place, power, and narrative is thus crucial to comprehend cultural identity for Muslim immigrant communities; and adapting Hall's model of Presences to the context in question revealed the key differences between a diaspora in a "third space" and one towards the heart of Europe. Having provided a theoretical outlook of cultural identity in the diaspora, the following chapter will explore in further detail the specifics of Muslim migrant communities in Europe, focusing on their history, current developments in religious and ethnic belonging, and the particular role of the newer generations, born and raised in Europe but often within segregated spaces and communities.

The Muslim Diaspora: past, present and future

Muslim immigration in Europe has a history spanning decades, from the early post-colonial migrants and the *Gastarbeiter* to the waves of refugees from Syria in the 2010s. What is often understood as a monolith from a European perspective is instead a much more complex kaleidoscope of educational and economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and sometimes even denominations of Islam. As established, what ties these people together is not a self-perceived "community" that every Muslim in Europe consciously feels part of; but rather a set of experiences, of positionings within narratives. Another important element of diasporic identity for Muslims in particular might be what Saint-Blancat (2002, p.148) calls a *"common virtual place of spirituality"*, meaning the Quran as a fundamentally extraterritorial and atemporal reference, and crucial source of symbolic capital for Muslims around Europe. However, if the Revelation of God is eternal and univocal for Muslims, the time and place where it is read, as well as the people who read it, are multiple and ever evolving. This chapter will therefore focus on the reality of the Diaspora, studying its history and evolution with particular attention to the generations of Muslims that follow the first settlers into Europe. Fundamental questions surrounding belief, ethnicity and sources of religious authority for the second generation and beyond will set the stage to finally understand the role of the Internet in the Diaspora at large, and most importantly in the reproduction and affirmation of Jihadi Radicalism.

Muslim settlement in Europe has a history spanning centuries, from the prosperous *Al-Andalus* in Spain to Sicily from the 9th to the 11th century, to the native populations of Muslims that to this day constitute the majority in Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo. Our attention will however be focused on the other face of Muslim presence in Europe: what we have already defined as the Diaspora, the 25.8 million Muslims who live in the European Union plus Norway and Switzerland and the UK (Pew Research Center, 2017). As established, this is far from a homogeneous community, with diverse ethnicities dispersed throughout *Banlieues*, city centers and semi-rural areas. The following section will provide a brief outlook of the most significant Muslim minorities in select European countries, describing the origin, composition, and outlook of the local immigrant communities.

France is, by some margin, the major European country with the highest proportion of Muslims in its population, with 5.7 million individuals, representing 8.8% of the French population (Pew Research Center, 2017). These are mostly the descendants of Algerian and Moroccan post-colonial immigrants, many of them settled in France after the independence of their home countries to enter

the booming labor market of the post-war period. After the 1970s, high migration was sustained by family reunifications, as well as new waves of economic migrants and refugees. The relationship between the French State and its society and Islam has long been a complicated, often acrimonious one: French colonialism has left a mark in the collective memory of the peoples of Maghreb and is generally read by them (often without much concrete evidence) as particularly harsh and exploitative when compared to British imperialism (Ahmed, 2018). What is sure is that France, with its imperial vocation and assimilationist attitude, has often not handled the decolonization process in a peaceful manner. The brutal Algerian War in particular has been traumatizing for both parties involved, leading to the fall of the Fourth French Republic and to a rise in anti-French sentiment in Algeria. Moreover, France is a highly centralist state, with a history of repression of minority cultures within its borders and a national ethos of secularism: finding itself with a growing minority of foreign peoples that the French (as the rest of the Europeans) see primarily as defined by their religion, has fueled a widespread (especially in the media) feeling of "existential threat" to the values of the *Republique*, namely *laïcité* and freedom of expression.

The former, a pillar of French Republicanism since the 1789 Revolution, has been described as *"marked neutrality"* of the State and its institutions (Alcino, 2016, p.53). It presupposes the reduction of religion to a private dimension when possible as a prerequisite for tolerance and individual liberty. Such a paradigm was relatively easy to maintain when France was a remarkably religiously homogenous country trying to rid itself of the influence of the Catholic church in State matters, but the introduction of a growing Muslim population, combined with the insistence of large sections of contemporary Islam on the importance of the *hijab* for women makes it impossible to keep *laïcité* as an unproblematic given. *Hijab*, as a *"conspicuous religious symbol"* is seen as a visible disturbance of the neutrality of public space, as well as a tool and symbol of oppression (Ahmed, 2018). This combination of suspicion and perceived violation of fundamental principles of Republicanism as led the French State to adopt a series of measures to combat the "symbolic disturbance" of the *hijab*: a 2004 law bans all religious symbols from public schools (Alcino, 2016), and the *Loi n° 2010-1192 du 11 octobre 2010 interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public* bans face coverings in all public spaces (essentially, a country-wide *burqa* and *niqab* ban). These measures, seen by French legislators as necessary for the preservation of a religiously neutral environment, have further antagonized many Muslims, reinforcing the idea of the *hijab* as symbolic resistance against Western imperialism that dates back to British colonialism in Egypt (Hamdan, 2007).

The second (and deeply interlinked with *laïcité*) principle under perceived threat from the "rise" of Islam in France is freedom of expression, which constitutes a sort of *"liberé matricielle"* from

which other fundamental freedoms derive in the French legal order (Alcino, 2016). If on one hand it lays the legal ground for the free expression of religious diversity, it also rejects any notion of "blasphemy laws", placing the protection of public order and individual rights as the only limitation to the criticizing and even express mockery of religion (Alcino, 2016). Such a principle, in its universal scope, was bound to enter into conflict to the Muslim collectivist ethic of the *umma*, which puts in extremely high regard the integrity and dignity of the community of believers as a whole, the unity of which is represented by the Quranic revelation and the Prophet Muhammad. The publication of a *Charlie Hebdo* (a French satirical magazine) cover mocking the Prophet (by itself a sinful act in Islamic jurisprudence) catalyzed a wave of outrage in the French Muslim community (Alcino, 2016), eventually leading to the infamous terrorist attack on the magazine's headquarters which claimed 17 innocent lives, sadly only the start of a wave of brutal terror attacks that have plagued France since then.

The Muslim community in France is economically and socially disparaged, discriminated in both the jobs and housing markets (Ahmed, 2018; Beiman, 2015). In light of the 2005 widespread upheavals in the *banlieues* of Paris, terrorism, foreign fighters and French involvement in the war against ISIS, Muslims are seen as "both the internal and external enemy" in France (Ahmed, 2018). Widely considered unwilling to integrate (whether that is true or not), the threat they represent in the view of French public opinion has led President Emmanuel Macron to vow a fight against the threat of a newly coined concept: "Islamic Separatism", which summarises in two simple words French anxieties about centralism, assimilation, and secularism. A new law, adopted in August 2021, cracks down on "separatism", putting under higher scrutiny (among other things) religious institutions (in terms of foreign funding and political meetings inside places of worship, which are severely sanctioned), and home-schooling. Whatever the result of this "war on Separatism", the French Muslim population is projected to grow significantly in the next years (Pew Research Center, 2017), and it is bound to claim its own place in a wider French society that will need to adapt to avoid fractures, a taxing task for institutions, people, and communities alike.

The country with the second highest Muslim population in Europe is Germany (Pew Research Center, 2017). Despite the historically significant presence of other Muslim migrant communities, such as the Bosnians (Thielmann, 2008), the overwhelming majority of the German Muslim population is, or descends from, immigrants from Turkey (but not necessarily *Turkish* in the ethnic sense). The *Gastarbeiter* phenomenon, by which post-war Germany brought in guest-workers through bilateral accords with other countries has already been mentioned. What should be

underlined, however, is the sheer scale and pace of this migration wave: Turkish guest-workers only started coming in from the early 1960, when labor from Mediterranean European countries (chiefly, Italy) was getting less competitive as their economies quickly developed, and all guest-worker immigration schemes were halted in 1973 in the wake of the Energy Crisis and the subsequent economic downturn. In this period, the number of Turkish people in Germany increased almost a hundredfold, from 6,700 to 605,000 (Türkmen, 2019), dramatically changing the ethnic landscape of a country that, especially after the territorial changes of the two World Wars and the Holocaust, had been homogenously "German". Even after the end of *Gastarbeiter* programs, family reunifications kept Turkish immigration going. This first wave of immigrants, due to both the German need for low-skilled manual labor and the prioritizing of applicants from underdeveloped regions, was generally poorly educated (Türkmen, 2019). The first *Gastarbeiter* were not expected to remain in the country, and no effort was made to integrate them in a country founded on the idea of an ethnic *Volk* and legally based on *jus sanguinis* (McFadden, 2019). Turks in Germany at this time were seen by many as an underdeveloped *ethnic* group (this distinction will show its importance later on), with foreign customs and poor hygiene (Ramm, 2010). They were followed by Kurds and Alevis, who came to Germany as asylum seekers following the upheavals of the 1980s in Turkey. These migrants had generally a higher level of education, but a lack of legal recognition of their credentials, mixed with the weight of already-formed stereotypes about those coming from Turkey essentially lumped them in with the ethnically Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (something that would appear surreal to both groups in their native country) in terms of both the external discrimination they faced and the occupations reserved for them (Türkmen, 2019).

Germany never held Muslim lands under its control, and its colonial "adventure" as a whole lasted less than half a century, from 1884 up to the end of the First World War. The closest thing to an historical tie Germany had with Turkey was fighting together in the aforementioned conflict: Turks were, fundamentally, outside of the *Volk* (Ahmed, 2018) and there was no precedence or institutional "tool" to make sense of them in Germany. They were and remained foreigners, both socially and legally: the legal status of migrants in Germany was regulated by the *Ausländerrecht*, a system of regulations specifically reserved for them (Ramm, 2010) and in 2018 only 246,000 out of 3 million Turks in Germany held German citizenship (McFadden, 2019). This system of "parallel worlds" was sustained by a strange mix of German hesitancy to demand assimilation following the horrors of the Nazi regime (Ahmed, 2018) and widespread racism; which produced attitudes ranging from irenic ideas of peaceful *Multi-Kulti* (a term used to describe pluralistic multiculturalism in Germany) to suspicion from afar.

Things changed in the 1990s, when an uptick in ethnically motivated attacks against immigrants sparked a wave of discourse that essentially forced the whole political spectrum (conservatives included) to rework the framework in which Turks in Germany were understood (Ramm, 2010): the Greens' insistence on multiculturalism as a solution led to the formation of a bloc of Christian Democrats and "disillusioned leftists" who read *Multi-Kulti* as a threat to German *culture*, and instead began insisting on integration and assimilation through the example of the German *Leitkultur*, or "leading culture" (Ramm, 2010). That apparently subtle shift in rhetoric had crucial implications: a discourse on difference that had previously been based on *blood*, *Volk*, and ethnicity had now become a question of culture and values. This laid the groundwork for the following transformation in the perception of Turkish migrants in Germany: already from the 1990s, and markedly so after 9/11, what were once "Turks" in the eye of German public opinion became "Muslims" (Ramm, 2010). This did not really reflect a change in attitudes amongst the Turks/Muslims in Germany, as "Political Islam" had been present in Germany since at least the 1980s with associations such as *Millî Görüş* (Thielmann, 2008) and was really rather the product of War on Terror moral panic and the new assimilationist dogma that had become hegemonic in public discourse (Ramm, 2010). The defenders of *Multi-Kulti* were permanently placed on the defensive, and the new wave of refugees from the Middle East in the 2000s and 2010s further problematized the supposed threat of Islam (Baden-Württemberg introduced in 2006 a citizenship test on "constitutional and western values" specifically for Muslim applicants [Ramm, 2010], something that reminds of French requests for allegiance to Republicanism).

Germany is at the same time one of the most open societies in Europe (and the world) and a stage of deeply problematic inter-ethnic and intercultural relationships, which has not been immune to the wave of Jihadi terrorism of the late 2010s. The pluralism and respect for diversity that was essential in rebuilding German confidence and its reputation with both itself and the rest of the world is contrasted by the disparaged status of Muslim migrants within its borders. A new wave of Turkish migrants, this time overwhelmingly university-educated has to deal with the weight of decades of stratified prejudice against their co-ethnics (Türkmen, 2019), while a huge number of Muslim refugees (the largest in Europe) has still to find its place in German society. Germany, much like France and other European countries, will need to constantly rediscuss its relationship with religious and ethnic difference within a collectivity that is growing increasingly diverse.

The United Kingdom is the third major European countries by number of Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2017). Britain, like France, has a long history of interactions with the Muslim world (from the 18th century onwards, mostly in the form of colonialism and exploitative trading practices). The

first Muslims to settle in the country, in fact, were seamen mostly coming from India recruited by the East India Company, who set dock in the English ports of South Shields, Cardiff and Liverpool and settled there, as well as in London's East End. These *lascars*, as they were called, occupied the outermost peripheral space in the country, living and working at the docks and staging area that, nonetheless, constituted the backbone of British imperial infrastructure (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Their numbers grew slowly, but in the late Victorian period Muslim presence in Britain was expanded by an influx of cultivated North-Indian students, coming from their native aristocratic and merchant classes to study in British universities (Gilliat-Ray, 2010), to join the ranks of those who, according to the paternalistic designs of colonialist intellectuals like Lord Macaulay were destined to become "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (Ahmed, 2018). As for other European countries, post-colonial migration to the UK followed the ups and downs of the labor market, with a spike in the early Sixties amid (founded) fears of an impending tightening of immigration laws for citizens of the Commonwealth (Ansari, 2002). The Muslim population of modern-day Britain, overwhelmingly ethnically South Asian (Ahmed, 2018), constitutes a significant minority in London, Birmingham, Leicester, and many former industrial centers in Norther England, like Bradford, where Muslims amount to as much as one fifth of a total population of 500,000 (Ansari, 2002; Ahmed, 2018).

Ahmed (2018) observed a higher rate of Muslims in the UK reporting to feel "British" compared to how comparatively few Muslims in France, for example, would describe themselves as French. This, as it has already partly stated, has to do with "Britishness" referring mostly to a *political¸* rather than ethnic community, with the possibility of different racial and cultural declinations embedded into it (Ahmed, 2018), as well as to an explicitly multiculturalist attitude on the part of British institutions from the mid-6os, when the paradigm of passive assimilation that was expected of Caribbean migrants entered into conflict with the reality of more "culturally different" South-Asians, until the 90s (Millns & Dustin, 2020). The institutional approach to migrant minorities in Britain shifted as net-migration numbers drastically increased from 1997 onwards, in a surge partly fueled by asylum-seekers (Sealy, 2020). Fears of migrants taking up welfare resources away from natives, inter-ethnic riots in the diverse suburbs of Bradford, Burnley and Ondham (Millns & Dustin, 2020), and terrorism have since then led to a tightening of immigration laws, a resurgence in assimilationist rhetoric, and widespread worry about segregated Muslim communities (Millns & Dustin, 2020). The perceived threat of *sharia* law taking over isolated communities throughout the country has been particularly salient in British discourse compared to other countries (Bowen, 2016). The "Sharia zone" affair, sparked by a now infamous Daily Mail (2011) article, presented white converts joining up with local Muslims to create Islamic enclaves within British urban spaces,

an image exactly opposite to that of "learned" Indians mastering a perfect accent in English universities. Britain too, like France and Germany, is not immune to Islamophobia and covert racism, pluralism has been challenged by history and generalized fears, and assimilation is made harder by housing segregation and a relatively homogenous Muslim population.

Other European countries have significant Muslim populations within their borders. The Netherlands and Belgium have a similar proportion of Muslims to total inhabitants similar to that of France (Pew Research Center). In Rotterdam Muslims represent the largest religious group if Atheists/Agnostics are not counted as such (Buitelaar & Stock, 2016), in a not-always peaceful coexistence that has had the murder of Dutch director Theo Van Gogh at the hands of a Dutch-Moroccan Islamist as one of its most tense points (Ahmed, 2018). Belgium, on the other hand, has become almost synonymous with unsuccessful integration of Muslim minorities, with highly segregated communities such as Molenbeek in the Brussels agglomeration acting as "terrorist sanctuaries" (Gatti, 2019) from which terror attacks throughout the continent have been planned and supported. Italy, fourth in the Pew (2017) sample by number of Muslims, is somewhat unique amongst major European countries for having a decisively more recent Muslim population, not really originating from the *Gastarbeiter* wave of the post-war labor market (Italy was, until the early 60s, a major *source* of guest workers for other European countries [Türkmen, 2019]), and instead settling in the country since the 80s, when demand for labor in industries was comparatively lower (Vidino, 2008). This led to arguably less segregated communities, as Muslims were not concentrated around former industrial neighborhoods, but did not do much to ease the tension with the native Italian population, which has the second highest percentage of people having an unfavorable view of Muslims among European countries, topped only by Hungary (Pew Research Center, 2017).

This is, clearly, not a comprehensive description of all the manifestations of the Muslim Diaspora on the European continent. This section rather aims to show some of the range of diversity in origins, places of settlement and relationship with the respective states and native societies that exists in what is often imagined as a monolithic group. It also shows a series of patterns common to most diasporic contexts: workers (almost all of whom are males) move to Europe looking for better job prospects, often after having been "invited" through guest worker programs. They then settle in those countries, the numerical gender gap decreases through family reunifications, and stable communities are born. In virtually all countries considered 9/11 and the War on Terror have soured relationships between the natives and the migrant communities, with "Muslim" becoming the primary label for peoples often previously mainly identified by their ethnic identity. Finally, a new

cohort of Muslims, mostly from Syria, is escaping war and famine to request asylum in Europe, reaching a continent already primed by media and popular discourse to fear a "Muslim invasion" and ethnic substitution (Pew Research Center, 2017). The following section will explore the way in which Muslims in the diaspora have dealt with their space of settling, both adapting to it and shaping it for their own needs. A discussion of the descendent generations following those who actually migrated will then explore changes in perspective of the host society, belonging and religious practice.

Whether in the most remote Parisian *banlieues* or in the destitute inner-city neighborhoods of Bradford, Muslims in Europe tend to display high levels of segregation, higher than other non-white immigrant communities in the continent (Varady, 2008). Neighborhoods were initially chosen for a variety of reasons, ranging from their proximity to industries where guest workers were employed, high vacancy rates that brought prices down, or the influence of institutions designating some areas as affordable housing (Ahmed, 2019; Varady, 2008). Once some migrants had moved to an area, word-of-mouth and family reunifications brought more into the same neighborhood. In most cases, the areas of settlement were already popular, cheap neighborhoods, which brought Muslim (and non-Muslim) migrants in competition for housing and communal spaces with the native European working class already living in those areas (Fulcher & Scott, 2011). Ethnic coexistence in the same zones does however seem like a mostly temporary arrangement, as neighborhoods that reach a "tipping point" in migrant population tend to be abandoned by the native Europeans who can afford to move, producing a trend towards segregation that is reinforced as migrants move to the newly vacated lodgings left by the natives (Varady, 2008). Neighborhoods "naturally" segregate also as a result of better economic outcomes for natives compared to Muslim immigrants, as for example the original diversity of the *banlieue* high-rise projects (built as Muslim migration to France was peaking) waned off as their ethnically French occupants could more easily participate in government-sponsored house-buying programs; or as, in the Netherlands, public housing projects are used by the Europeans as stepping-stones before finding more permanent housing, and as places of settlement for Muslim migrants (Varady, 2008). Segregation is, of course, not merely the result of natural market dynamics: discrimination plays a big role in barring migrants from moving in certain areas (Ahmed, 2019; Buitelaar & Stock, 2016; Varady, 2008), especially in places where the housing market is based on a multitude of individual landlords (as opposed to larger projects or government housing) who often will prefer not to rent to people outside their ethnic community: this is why cities in central and northern England tend to display some of the highest rates of segregation in Europe (Varady, 2008). So far, the agency and intentionality of Muslim migrants in

the birth of ethnic enclaves has not been fully considered: the reality is that, whatever the social outcomes for the wider collectivity of segregated neighborhoods, there's a variety of reasons why migrants would choose to live amongst their peers: concentration allows for more readily available support systems to those who just arrived in the host country, often not mastering the local language (Varady, 2008). Being surrounded by their peers eases the per-se disorienting experience of migration, as well as offering a "safe space" less exposed to the individual acts of discrimination or hostility that one could face when living in the wider urban space. At the same time, Muslim migrant communities appropriate the spaces in which they settle, opening halal stores, banks, prayer halls (and, when possible, mosques), cultural centers (often offering language classes and support for those seeking a job), and recreational spaces that reflect local customs of origin countries and their specific cultural and religious sensitivities (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012; Saint-Blancat, 2002; Buitelaar & Stock, 2016). When considering the constant renegotiating of identity that Muslims in Europe have to engage in in wider European society, ethnic enclaves may be seen as havens, partly shielded from both the hierarchical and physical elements of the European Presence and the system of values it imposes: participation in religious services and associations can be a way of accruing social capital and respectability (a respectability that holds its value almost exclusively within the borders of the enclave itself), two social "goods" that would simply not be possible to obtain for ordinary Muslims in wider society (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012).

The reasons for such a high degree of ethnic concentration are thus varied and not easy to understand comprehensively, especially given the higher levels of segregation for Muslims than other immigrant groups (Varady, 2008). What is sure, is that they do not contribute to cultural assimilation (whether that is a good thing or not), and reinforce religious participation (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012).

It should be understood that most first-generation Muslim migrants arrive from countries where their religion is culturally hegemonic, and thus by definition relatively unproblematic, as are the morals deriving from it (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). Arriving in a country where such morals are not only scarcely present, but often actively frowned upon, forces migrants to rediscuss their value systems and the interpretation of their religious identity in a space when it is far from the unquestioned norm. From this initial stimulus, a variety of outcomes are possible: one could "secularize", gradually diluting their religiosity in the wider European system of values while maybe engaging in some traditions that are religious in origin, identifying as a Muslim while conducting a "Western" life or abandoning the religion altogether (Peter, 2006). Other strategies may be more intimately tied to the interpretation of religious directives in the new social contexts:

as Saint-Blancat (2002) puts it, Muslim religiosity is much more centered on *orthopraxis*, or regulation of behavior, than moral and interiorized *orthodoxy*. While the relationship with God is direct and unmediated, expressed individually through the five "Pillars" of belief, the rest of daily life is regulated by the field of *fiqh*, the Islamic legal tradition, with its different schools, centuries-long history and remarkable flexibility. Islamic jurisprudence does in fact attempt to adapt to the specific needs of the *umma* it serves, and specifically to the social context a certain group of Muslims may live in. This, naturally, makes it possibly the preferred site of negotiation for Muslim identity in Europe (Saint-Blancat, 2002), allowing for the discussion of an appropriate *orthopraxis* for the European context whilst not necessarily (for some, the boundary between adaptation and sinful *innovation* is unclear) going outside the boundaries of "proper" Islam. This is a hotly contested field in the context of the diaspora, with families, local imams, new religious entrepreneurs and young Muslims all with their own ideas on what the relationship with the legal tradition should look like.

One trend that has been observed is the so-called *privatization* of religion (Peter, 2006): some Muslims are, in a way, expressing their religiosity in increasingly *European*, or even *Christian-like* terms, shifting towards private worship and diminishing the role of religion in their social identity (Peter, 2006; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012; Vertovec & Rogers, 1998). This is a particularly interesting phenomenon in a religion that puts a strong emphasis on the idea of a "community of believers" both as the natural space of the individual and as the subject whose dignity and purity is to be defended. Another "style of *orthopraxis*" is that of selective embracement of traditional principles and their associated behaviors (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012; Vertovec & Rogers, 1998). Sometimes described as a "consumer approach" to religion, such a view of Islam is in reality often rooted in a critical outlook to religious tradition, that doesn't shy away from considering some deep-rooted practices as contingent to the historical context in which they were codified whilst not denying the universal validity of Revelation per-se (Peter, 2006). If the idea of recognizing the historical and cultural (thus not *universal*) origin of some religious practices often manifests itself in a shedding of the more "integralist" elements of Islam, introducing for example the idea of "wearing the *hijab* on the inside" (Saint-Blancat, 2002), the same process of historical contextualization can be employed for a very different purpose: shedding Islam of *innovations*, whether they come from deeply-rooted ethnic practices or European value systems, manufacturing a pure "Islam of the origins" that by establishing clear boundaries of strict *orthopraxis* reinforces the self-othering of Muslims, to protect them from Western corruption and increase their ability to make their voice heard in wider society (Saint-Blancat, 2002).

The strict observance of normative codes of worship, such as the strict abstention from *haram* foods and alcohol, the veiling of women, and beard-growing for men serves a double purpose: on one hand, these visible performances of "Muslimness" challenge European regimes of representation, directly refuting through practice Western conceptions of "high-status clothing", standards of modesty and free time. On the other, they increase the internal cohesion of the community, shedding all those ethnic declinations of religion (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012) that hinder the creation of a truly unified Islamic front in the West.

The transformations in religious practices and conceptions of belonging are not, at this point, happening only at the level of the first generation. The trends described above apply to the descendent generations as well, often in novel ways informed by their particular cultural sensitivity. Rather than being just "in-between two cultures", *hybrids* of their ethnoreligious community and European society, Vertovec & Rogers (1998) argue that second generations Muslims can skillfully switch and combine different cultural codes according to their needs and desires (here partly referencing Ann Swindler's [1986] idea of a *cultural toolkit*). Well versed in the worldviews of both their parents' Islam, the new religious trends and Western society, second generation migrants are agents of discursive innovation in the field of religion who generally share a desire for a reappropriation of Islam that rids itself of "ethnic" elements (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012), but then take this desire in varying and sometimes opposing directions: far from being a cohesive group in the field of religiousness, Voas & Fleischmann (2012) propose than rather than moving towards secularism or radicalization, the second generation is simply more *dispersed* in their varied degrees and strategies of religious practice. While their parents were socialized to religion in an unproblematic, unquestioning setting that encouraged a relative convergence of religious practice, the problematization of religious identity is something young Muslims face since they are born, especially in those countries that place specific restrictions on religious expression for minors, like France (Beiman, 2015). European schools in particular seem to play a big role in shaping the relationship between young Muslims and Islam, introducing the tensions that have led many to see the *hijab* as a tool of resistance (Vertovec & Rogers, 1998; Ahmed, 2018; Buitelaar & Stock, 2016) and just as importantly transmitting the value of argumentation, rationalist reasoning and critical debate (Vertovec & Rogers, 1998). These ideas are seen as critical in second-generation religiosity, as they could partly explain both the move of many young Muslims towards secularism and the parallel trend of increasing attraction towards doctrinal purity and the *"true Islam"* with its uncompromising internal coherence and disdain for "hypocrisies" of ethnic and secular origins. In a way, a de-ethnicised, completely uncompromising and literalistic Islam is more *rational* or logically

sound than the hybridized and localized form religion almost always assumes in a natural historical setting.

All of this is happening in a context of widely recognized decline and fragmentation of traditional, often *imported* sources of religious authority (Peter, 2006). Imams and their mosques (where they are present) are experiencing a relative decline, often made worse by the fact that many of them are not even versed in the local language, hindering especially communication with the younger generations (Vertovec & Rogers, 1998). A new landscape of local preachers, charismatic figureheads touring entire countries, tele-Imams and online communities is responding to a still very present *demand* for normative and theological advice (Peter, 2006; Saint-Blancat, 2002). Religion, and more specifically religious *practice* is a hotly contested field in a context that forces a continuous problematization of Islam, and the newer generations are playing a crucial role in shaping and adapting what it means to be a Muslim. The following chapter will focus on them, their relationship with the radical "Islam of the origins" that we have already introduced, and the role played by the Internet in offering young Muslims new tools, and a new field in which to express (and craft) their identity.

The Internet and Radical Islam: Crafting identities

After having provided a theoretical framework for cultural identity in the Muslim Diaspora, as well as a brief outlook of the ways in which Muslims throughout the world have settled *en masse* in the European continent, making home in the most disparate contexts and navigating specific national communities that often view them with suspicion or hostility; we can now turn our attention to the Internet, its relationship to the Diaspora, and the way that some Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) craft and reproduce a Global Islamic imagined *umma* through images, rulings, memes and online interactions. Our attention will not, however, be centered on "Muslim Internet" as a whole: such a concept, if it even makes sense, would certainly be too broad, and its borders too ill-defined for any meaningful analysis in the context of a bachelor's thesis. We will instead focus on those websites that exist in the *continuum* of Radical Islam, the definition of which will be provided for in the first section of this chapter.

It is important to underlie the fact that Radical Islam is not representative of the Islamic community as a whole, and even less of the Diaspora in Europe, for which the overall trend, although sufficiently vast and representative quantitative analyses are hard to find, seems to be going towards some form of "secularization" (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). We will be also not (only) talking about *Jihadism* per-se, as violent Radical Islamism is only part of a wider fundamentalist

movement, sections of which sometimes even expressly condemn violence (although the sincerity of these condemnations is sometimes doubtful to say the least), based on an ultra-literalist and traditional interpretation of the Quran and Sunna. Radical Islam probably is, as a whole, a threat to European societies and social order, but equating it to Jihadism would be factually incorrect, as will be explained in the next section. In light of these clarifications, the choice of Radical Islamic Internet as the object of our study can be understood as optimizing the balance between salience (as Radical Islamists, proposing a meta-narrative and cultural identity in unequivocal opposition to that of Liberal Europe, are more interesting subjects in the study of identity constructions) and accessibility (as most explicitly *Jihadist* CIEs are closed-off and hard to access, making primary sources difficult to obtain). The result is a wide picture of what the Radical Islamic Internet looks like, both today and in the past, and the way in which it reinforces and reproduces in-group/out-group mechanics through identity crafting, using the distinctive features of online spaces to its advantage.

When discussing religious trends in the Muslim Diaspora, we have touched upon the idea of a movement of "global, uncompromising" Islam, that proudly sheds itself of both Western "innovations" and ethnic flavors, barred as dangerous deviation, often idolatrous in nature, from an original "core" of belief that would constitute "Real Islam". This movement, although diverse in its specific expressions and in the particular theological as well as normative *corpus* it espouses, can be put under the broad label of "Salafism". The core tenet of Salafism is the doctrine of divine unity (*tawhid*), seen in three main dimensions (Adraoui, 2019): *tawhid* of Divinity (Allah as the only one worthy of worship), *tawhid* of Lordship (Allah as the only one capable of shaping the world at his will), and finally *tawhid* of Names and Attributes, which identifies Allah as the only perfect embodiment of qualities of greatness and perfection, also tied to an ultra-literalist reading of the Quran when it comes to descriptions of God (Some jihadists also speak about *tawhid* of sovereignty, or see it as a consequence of the three main conceptions of divine unity).

This all-encompassing unity is, naturally, challenged by diversity and locality, thus explaining the Salafi obsession for the destruction of any *ethnic* or *innovative* flavor of Islam that might undermine its pureness. The veneration of saints, the worship of tombs, ethnic rituals mixed with religious ones, are all seen as forms of idolatry that threaten the doctrinal and practical purity of the *umma,* and thus need to be uprooted by any means necessary.

The achievement of true *tawhid,* according to Adraoui (2019) happens for Salafists as a result of a threefold movement: backwards to the ways of the *al-salaf al-salihin* (the "pious" ancestors, the first three generations of Muslims from which Salafists take the name and aesthetic imaginary); in

the present through the introduction and observance of real Islamic principle and the rejection of innovation; and finally in the future, towards a perfect, unified *umma* based on divine law.

Politically, Salafism is divided among three main groups that identify different political strategies as more conducive to the realization of *tawhid*: *quietists*, as they're called, insist on respect towards political authority to avoid civil strife, which would further undermine unity (in ibn Hanbal's words: "better sixty years of tyranny than one night of anarchy"). *Political* Salafism sees political action to obtain power within existing established hierarchies as a balanced solution to obtain the position needed to start crafting a true Islamic society. *Jihadi* Salafism, lastly, sees armed struggle as the only way to topple apostate or infidel (*kufr*) regimes and restore true Islam (Adraoui, 2019).

Salafism, although here explained as a recent movement within Islam, has been a part of Islamic discourse for centuries: calls for a return to a "true worship" based around the doctrine divine unity (*tawhid*) have been put forward by some of the most significant intellectuals in Muslim history: Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (particularly important for modern Jihadism) and Muhammad ibn al-Wahab are all today considered important references of the Salafist movement, and their intellectual contributions are often cited in Salafist media and other radical spaces (Adraoui, 2019). The historical ties of al-Wahab to the Saud family are particularly important in the development of Salafism around the world: the alliance of the scholar with a Saudi prince was the first attempt at unifying the Arabian Peninsula, an attempt that would succeed in the following generation. "Wahabism", as it was called, has since been the officially state-sanctioned reading of Islam in Saudi Arabia, which although promoting a decisively *quietist* flavor of Salafism domestically, has financed and operated a vast network of more politically activist Salafi organizations around the world as part of its foreign policy efforts to make it the center of "global Islam" (Adraoui, 2019).

It is arguably this effort at *trans-nationalizing* Salafism that has accentuated its calls for a homogenous global *umma*, an idea strengthened by the experience of many Salafist preachers who travelled the world to fight on the frontlines of global *jihad* in Afghanistan, Iraq and Bosnia (Klausen, 2021) with their fellow *mujaheddin,* to then return to Europe as veteran sages. It should here be noted that many scholars today distinguish clearly Jihadism from Salafism, as the former brings to the table some relevant ideological/theological peculiarities (an apocalyptic mindset and the *tawhid* of sovereignty, for example), and even more importantly because it seems to be the case that many Jihadi terrorists do not come from a properly Salafist socialization that they bring to the extreme; but rather have previous violent tendencies that they rationalize and insert in a merely *borrowed* Salafist narration (Adraoui, 2019). Our interest is, however, focused on exactly what assimilates Salafism and Jihadism: a common epistemology of *tawhid* and the consequent aesthetic

and narrative imagery around which a Radical Islamic identity is built: unquestionably Jihadist websites make ample use of Salafi representative codes, depicting Osama bin-Laden on a horse as the early companions of the Prophet and using old, traditional-looking calligraphies in their web pages as opposed to the more accessible fonts used to write and read modern Arabic on computers and phones (Fighel, 2007). Ultimately, whether all jihadists genuinely embrace every aspect of Salafi theology and doctrine is not of particular relevance to the scope of this thesis: what matters (especially in a religion fundamentally based on *orthopraxis* rather than orthodoxy) is that, in Bordieuan terms, Salafism acts as a reservoir of symbolic capital for jihadists and non-violent radicals alike, who craft their identity and their difference from the out-group through symbolic practices: growing a beard, wearing the niqab, learning Arabic and sharing jihadist memes are all elements of a wider process of identity formation, parts of which happen in Cyber Islamic Environments. The following sections will explore some of these environments, studying their peculiarities, their function in the Diaspora, and the particular opportunities they offer for the crafting of one's social and cultural identity.

Bunt (2018) defines the concept of Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) as an umbrella term, encompassing all online activities describing themselves, explicitly or not, as belonging to Islam. He finds the concept useful to identify key developments in the history of religious expression for Muslims deriving from the rise of Information Technology: the web, he argues, is not a *neutral* space with equal ease of access for all. Instead, the internet has its own mechanics that separate Islamic discourse online from traditional forms of religiosity. Features like anonymity, multimedia content, and hyperlinks shape the way messages are spread and received (Bunt, 2018; Odağa et al., 2019) and the level of technological literacy required to master the use of online platforms makes it so that tech savviness has partly taken over more traditional scholarly credentials in the crafting of religious authority online, something particularly salient at a time when the authority and influence of traditional imams is decreasing (Peter, 2006). We now turn our attention to these environments, and particularly to those Radical Cyber Islamic Environments (RCIEs) that propose or propagate views pertaining or adjacent to the Salafist imaginary, employing scholarly literature to analyze their history, development and function in the construction of a global Islamic identity, as well as some anecdotal evidence from primary sources confirming the findings of studies with more rigorous sourcing methodologies. Firstly, we are going to study *e-fatwa* websites, for their historical importance to the development of CIEs and their normative value in the Diaspora in Europe. Then, Radical Islamic web communities (that presuppose some level of active *membership*, whether through a subscription or posting) will be analyzed, studying their development across different

platforms and modes of communication and the way they aid in constructing cultural identity for their members.

As already discussed, the legal scholarly tradition, and in particular *fatwas*, legal opinions responding to a real or imagined question from a petitioner to a scholar (*mufti*), is of central importance in the European Muslim Diaspora, where Islamic law is not enforced by the State or wider society, and believers are constantly finding themselves in an environment that problematizes religion even if only by mere exposure to the *other* (Saint-Blancat, 2002; Šisler, 2006). Not only do migrant Muslims find themselves in a place where their religious ethic is not a given, but they are consequently also exposed to a series of experiences and questions that they would not encounter in their native country or within the borders of their own ethnic urban enclave. This, combined with the scarce availability of religious spaces and imams capable of responding to the daily-life needs of believers, produces a strong demand for religious authority within migrant communities (Peter, 2006). This lead to the birth of a multitude of so-called *e-fatwa* websites (some of the very first CIEs to ever exist), offering forms where to ask questions, the responses to which would be posted on the websites themselves, to be seen and used by Muslims around the world to solve normative issues in their daily lives. Šisler (2006) was among the first to study e-fatwa websites in the very first years of their history, when internet access was notably less widespread (especially among poorer demographics like migrants) and web practices less developed. Offering a comprehensive outlook of *e-fatwas* in Europe and the rest of the world, he partly ties the phenomenon of online legal advice to an "individualization" of faith, also underlined by Peter (2006) and many others, but also recognizes the technology's potential to become the main normative referee for Muslims in Diaspora, in a way aiding to the creation of a Muslim migrant community with its own practices based on their particular context. He offers an example of the potential of web-based *fatwas* in the 1999 European Council for Fatwa and Research's decision to allow taking loans to find housing, widely circulated on many other *fatwa* websites (Šisler, 2006): taking loans with interest is generally prohibited in Islam, but the Council allowed it in cases of need, basing its decision also on the nature of Western housing markets and high prices. This first example is a tell-tale sign of a possibly positive development: the gradual construction of an Islam *for* Europeans that accounts for the context in which migrants exist, with an attitude based on mutual adaptation rather than total rejection. The author is however skeptical of those narratives depicting the internet as an unquestionably democratizing and liberal force (Šisler, 2006), and already recognized the overrepresentation of Salafism among *e-fatwa* websites. The inherent qualities of the internet, he argued, favored and eased comparisons between different *mufti*, websites, and legal schools,

highlighting the differences between them (Šisler, 2006). This plays right into the tendency of young Muslims to look for a more real, *authentic* form of Islam, a search that often leads to Salafism, as its entire ideology is built on the pretense of authenticity (Adraoui, 2019), which Radicals claim to essentially monopolize.

In 2022, the internet landscape presents itself as markedly different from what it was in the late 90s and early 2000s. Time and competition perfected a few big platforms that today represent the vast majority of web traffic for *e-fatwas*. According to Similarweb (2022), the largest web traffic ranking platform, the two main *e-fatwa* websites are islamweb.net, with 22.5 million visits in April 2022, closely followed by islamqa.info, with 18.3 million visits in the same period (although it should be noted that these results are for the period of Ramadan: traffic in March for the same websites was 17.7 million and 12 million respectively). Both websites have legal questions front and center in their interfaces, with Islamweb giving also more space to articles and other kinds of content. Both offer their *fatwas* in multiple languages: just considering European idioms, Islamweb offers content in English, German, Spanish and French (Islamweb, 2022), while IslamQ&A publishes in English, German, Spanish, French, Russian and Portoguese (IslamQ&A, 2022). Both seem to fit in into Šisler's idea of making Islamic knowledge accessible and easy to understand (a goal explicitly stated in both websites' about page), but the real, deep-rooted differences between the two platforms soon emerge just by looking at the official material they produce and the people and organizations behind them. Islamweb, funded by the Qatari Ministry for Religious Affairs (Arab Media & Society, 2009), seems to promote an overall mainstream version of Islam: its about page reads *"As a rule, Islamweb adopts balanced and moderate views, devoid of bias and extremism. It is designed to address the interests of a wide audience - casual viewers, new converts to Islam, and Muslims of long standing"*. IslamQ&A, on the other hand, founded by Salafi scholar Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, states its methodology as promoting *"the ʿaqeedah (beliefs) of Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l-Jamaaʿah and the followers of the righteous early generations of Islam (as-salaf as-saalih)"*, thus explicitly placing itself in the Salafist movement. It should be noted that Islamweb too often celebrates the virtues of Salafism in its rulings (Islamweb, Fatwa No.5484, 2012; Fatwa No.86236, 2004), but is not directly tied to Salafism nor does it claim to be Salafist in its official material, thus differing from the decidedly more uncompromising IslamQ&A, that completely embraces and promotes the ideology of its founder and thus could be rightly classified as a RCIE. Looking through published *fatwas* on IslamQ&A, one can easily find explicit calls for young girls in mixed schools to drop out of education to avoid sin (Fatwa 8827, 2008) as all that is required of a woman in terms of schooling is "that she can read and write and knows the teachings of her

religion". Other *fatwas* label violent *jihad* against disbelievers (this distinction is important, as many more moderate sources only speak about "*jihad* against oneself" or "*jihad* through words" as obligations) a collective obligation (*fard kafaayah*), meaning that if not enough people are taking part in it, it becomes an individual obligation upon each able Muslim (Fatwa 20214, 2001), or forbid friendships with non-Muslims (Fatwa 21530, 2011). These ideas are presented through constant referrals to the Quran and the *hadith*, inserted within the text of the actual opinion so often that fruition is impeded. On the other hand, such a citation style and choice of format presents the (often extreme) opinions of the *mufti* as logical consequences of passages of Divine Revelation, which require no more than a few words of comment to reveal their "real" meaning. This "style" of *fatwa* is in fact perfectly aligned with the general Salafi "aesthetic of authenticity" that constitutes its appeal to many young Muslims (Peter, 2006; Fighel, 2007; Bunt, 2018).

If *e-fatwa* websites serve as the main "mechanism in dealing with normative issues" in Europe (Šisler, 2006), then Salafi Q&A platforms may represent the main normative institution in the global Radical *umma*, which appreciates the uncompromising attitude of its *muftis* as it confirms and reinforces their in-group/out-group thinking while endowing it with the authority of Revelation. Further updated research on the *e-fatwa* phenomenon is surely needed, as the importance it has as the only source of religious authority for millions of migrants, isolated Muslims and converts with no access to original sources or traditional authorities cannot be overstated.

If a global community of Radical Muslims is emerging as a group with its own cultural identity, with identifiable Islamic mannerisms, clothing styles and language use, Salafi *e-fatwa* websites act as its normative open-access reference point. Non-Salafist Muslims and outright non-believers are among the stated target audience of many *e-fatwa* websites: Radicals who might have been socialized into Salafism elsewhere can always point to websites like IslamQ&A when discussing religion with more moderate Muslims or "infidels", shifting the burden of argumentation from themselves to supposedly authoritative *muftis* and the passages of Revelation they heavily cite. Looking up on the Internet almost any question on Islam consistently yields *fatwas* from IslamQ&A among the first results, making it very easy for moderate Muslims in search of advice to stumble upon Salafi content. The idea that anyone would be properly "radicalized" just by reading *fatwas* on the Internet without any prior cognitive opening to seems highly unlikely (Odağa et al., 2019), but it is indeed possible that many would integrate the content of specific *fatwas* they looked up for in search of advice in their *orthopraxis*, almost inevitably leading to increased isolation from wider society and furthering the Salafist agenda of building a parallel, insulated community of "pure" Muslims. The public nature of *e-fatwa* websites and their passive mode of fruition (the amount of

people who actually manage to submit questions is negligible compared to monthly website visitors) are thus both the reason for their success and a limitation of their potential: even though the sheer number of issued rulings limits the impact of public scrutiny, these websites do not manage build proper radical "communities" around them in the way that forums, micro-blogging sites like Twitter and encrypted messaging boards like Telegram do. Being one of the very first CIEs to be developed, *e-fatwa* platforms may not have made full use of the true potential of the Internet, and one of the factors that separates it from conventional media: Internet users are *"prosumers"* (Bellar et al., 2013) who passively consume online content while at the same time *creating* content, whether through memes, posts, retweets or even likes and reactions. It has been suggested that Radicalization works best on marginalized individuals in search of more attractive narratives to frame their lives into: in this sense, the *interactive* character of the virtual *umma* is what really provides them opportunity for status (Odağa et al., 2019). Web browsing is, at face value, a fundamentally solitary and anonymous activity, but that same anonymity coexists with a marked need for community building and belonging that often drives internet use (Sands, 2010). The anonymous, depersonalized status of a Telegram channel subscriber, a forum member, or a Jihadist Twitter account decreases the perception of one's own particularities and increases the salience of shared social identities (Odağa et al., 2019). The individuality of each face-less user is dissolved in an echo chamber (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013) of semi-identical *prosumers* that is often more radical than each user's individual views and furthers in-group/out-group thinking by its very nature, as their shared *"difference from"* and *"opposition to"* seems to be the only thing capable of tying together complete strangers with no discernible personality features onto which to build actual social bonds.

Before discussing specific examples of Radical Islamic web communities, it is worth mentioning that assessing the effectiveness of such spaces as tools of Jihadist *radicalization* falls outside the scope of this thesis. Online resources have definitely been employed to raise funds, provide logistical support, connect terrorist cells and give access to particular figures in the Jihadist and Radical community (Alkhouri, 2019; Klausen, 2021; Odağa et al., 2019). The question of whether the internet is an effective tool of violent radicalization is, however, unclear: despite being a great source of concern for both governments and the media, the extent to which one can *self-radicalize* to *jihad* online without the mediation of any real-life contact is dubious to say the least (Odağa et al., 2019), and almost all *Jihadist* radicals report having some face-to-face contacts or other experiences as fundamental parts of their radicalization journey (Odağa et al., 2019; Edwards & Gribbon, 2013). Gresser (2018), identifies 4 main steps in the religious radicalization process:

firstly, some real of perceived grievance with wider society provides the *"cognitive opening"* needed for the next step, the seeking of ideologies and groups that might address the felt injustice or pain in a satisfactory manner. The radicalizing individual then finds an ideology that provides understanding for their grievance and frame it in a desirable narrative, and finally starts engaging in activities that further and solidify the new ideology. The internet could possibly play a role in any and each one of these steps, and Salafist online communities (whose members could possibly radicalize to non-violent Salafism "by themselves") may act as "recruiting grounds" for potential Jihadists, from which experienced recruiters select potential subjects to contact privately and directly (Odağa et al., 2019). Whatever the feasibility of online recruiting for violent *Jihad*, we are mainly interested in how Radical Islamic web communities help construct and reinforce a radical cultural identity, a concept that is partly (but not entirely) encompassed in the last step of Gresser's model.

The first of these Radical Islamic Web Communities (RIWC) to emerge in the World Wide Web of the late 90s and early 2000s were forums and discussion boards. One particularly relevant forum (or *family* of forums), especially interesting for its vast outreach, its direct contacts to Al-Qaida, and its fundamental link with the Muslim Diaspora in Europe is the *At-Tibyan* network (Klausen, 2021; Alkhouri, 2019). The minds behind *At-Tibyan* were Aabid Khan, a young Bradford native, and Younes Tsouli, the particularly tech-savvy 19 years old son of a Moroccan diplomat. They assembled a network of closely interlinked websites, ranging from password-protected forums to mere propaganda outlets, which heavily featured publications in pdf format of translated texts from prominent Jihadist ideologues (Klausen, 2021), which they could easily obtain thanks to the direct link with Al-Qaida leadership Tsouli had gained thanks to his technical expertise, in a demonstration of what was mentioned above in terms of tech-savviness potentially acting as a substitute for religious authority in climbing the ranks of Jihadi-Salafi spaces.

From London, Tsouli and Khan supervised the birth of a vast network of websites in languages other than English: only considering websites in European languages, we can find a Danish version (tawhid.dk), a Swedish one, and the infamous French-language ribaat.org (Klausen, 2021).

All the websites linked to Tsouli featured common themes of what can be termed "Islamic web design" (Fighel, 2007): the very names these forums used where taken from typical Salafi "catchwords" (like "tawhid", unity) and all of them featured a *Hijra* calendar (the Muslim calendar, starting from Mohammad's voyage to Medina), either alone or next to a Gregorian calendar for context and easier fruition (Fighel, 2007; Klausen, 2021). While the text posted on the websites themselves was in the local European language of the intended target audience, the web pages were

filled with decorative text in old Arabic fonts (Klausen, 2021; Sands, 2010). Even if direct communication between users often happened outside the forums by the means of private e-mails and password-protected boards, a sense of community was promoted by the vast use of iconography, which according to Fighel (2007), had the additional scope of signaling a website as "truly Islamic" to web surfers.

A prominent feature of both the main site and the French offspring ribaat.org was a wide use of images and videos. War scenes, videos of pleading Palestinians, Guantanamo Bay prisoners and *mujaheddin* on the frontlines of *Jihad* are accompanied by dramatic music and lyrics (Sands, 2010). The emotional appeal of these videos has a double effect: on one side, it catalyzes support for violent effort, picturing the global *umma* as suffering under the siege of Western crusaders and the persecution of intelligence agencies. On the other hand, taken together with the rest of iconographic and web design elements on their hosting sides, they act as a double reminder of a common past (through the *Hijra* calendar and the fonts) and a shared living struggle: Hall (1990) described how Armet Francis' photographs of the peoples of the Black Triangle in Africa, the USA, the UK and the Caribbean acted as a form of *"imaginary reunification"* and resistance against Western regimes of representation. In a sick turn, the same act of visual construction that recreated "Africa" as ancestral common home for Black peoples is appropriated by Radical Islamists, who combine it with emotional appeals to craft the global *umma* they envision. Past glories and present struggle are constantly reminded and referred to through Radical Islamic web communities, and translated versions of works by ancient Salafi reference authors (Sands, 2010; Klausen, 2021) give more authority and *authenticity* to the constant calls for armed struggle against the *Kufr*.

Increased scrutiny by government and media watchdogs have pushed these forums and webpages away from easily accessible domains, bringing them to the *deep web*, a section of the Internet that is not indexed by traditional searched engines and that can only be accessed through dedicated platforms like Tor (Alkhouri, 2019). This move, although somewhat reducing their reach, shielded Radical Islamic forums from both the law, possibly allowing for even more radical content to be displayed, and researchers, greatly decreasing the ease of study of Radical Islamic online phenomena (Winter, 2019). The history of RIWCs, however, did not end there. The rise of social media and micro-blogging websites had not gone unnoticed in Salafist and Jihadist circles: Twitter in particular, with its viral mechanics, hashtags, and ease of anonymity, became the center of a new wave of Radical Islamic web activity: the Islamic State was particularly savvy in employing twitter for its propaganda effort. During its period of highest success, Twitter accounts supporting or related to ISIS produced close to 200.000 tweets a day (Alkhouri, 2019), way too many for

individual moderators to review and block accounts directly related to calls for violence or support for armed *Jihad*. Even when Twitter cracked down on Jihadist accounts, Radical users created new ones or migrated to encrypted messaging services, like Telegram, thus extending the longevity of ISIS's *media Jihad* way past the end of its territorial conquests (Alexander, 2017).

The shift to Telegram deeply influenced the way Radical Islamic actors spread propaganda, raise funds and build communities: the platform, which features highly secure end-to-end encryption, is designed to elude government regulation and surveillance (Klausen, 2021). Its user interface is that of a mobile messaging app, much like WhatsApp, with the key difference that Telegram also features *channels*, communities when one user (the channel administrator) can post content for the subscribers to see. Fruition is not, however, passive: subscribers can react to all posts, and a sense of participation is nurtured by the fact that one has to *subscribe* to a channel to see its content. Given the secrecy surrounding these communities and the lack of easy ways to find channels of interest (As they are not indexed on search engines [Alkhouri, 2019]), entering a new channel can be rewarding, much in the same way that Fighel (2007) describes the sense of discovery and thrill of finding a *"real Islamic"* forum in the early days of RIWCs. Channels are advertised on more open social media, such as Facebook and Instagram pages, and target younger people specifically, due to both the nature of the platform itself and the frequent pop culture references used to lure users in, such as hip-hop-style videos and graphics substituting the titles of famous movies with appeals to *Jihad* (Jugendschutz, 2016). The content of these communities varies greatly: some are *halal* fitness groups, some share Afghan recipes, and some others are meme pages. This diversity is indicative of the Salafi effort to construct an alternative imagery capable of completely substituting "European" spaces of socialization, from fitness to humor. Even in "specialized" channels, though, even those fairly innocuous in nature, links to other communities and chats are present, along with links to fundraisers were subscribers have to donate in crypto to avoid traceability. Fundraising through Telegram has become standard practice for contemporary Jihadists, and the stated goals range from armed Jihad (Alkhouri, 2019) to "helping Muslims in Palestine". One English language Telegram group, after having posted a video of Israeli forces attacking Palestinian worshippers, posted a fundraiser to get "food and medical resources". The post continuously mentioned the importance of donating in the most anonymous way possible and provided a link to download Tor (a browser used to access the deep web), as well as links to the crypto wallets of one Jordanian and one Lebanese account. Subscribers were instructed to download Tor and donate to the crypto wallets using Monero, a cryptocurrency known for its advanced privacy features. The post ended with a further plea for donors, saying that *"Some of this may be new to you or complicated, but if*

you say you care about Palestine and the ummah you should be willing to put your time and money where your mouth is" (Sharia is Superior [M. Inc.] Telegram Channel, 2021). Other channels, called *suq* like the Arabic word for market, act as weapons dealers in both Europe and the Middle East, or provide contacts with human traffickers to bring *mujaheddin* to the frontlines of *Jihad* (Alkhouri, 2019). Telegram channels, despite the frequent crackdowns attempted by the platform to reduce illegal activity, are thus an important element of the infrastructure of both global *Jihad* and the new Salafi *umma*. Links, tags and other posts referring to vast networks of interrelated channels make it so that relatively innocuous communities are seamlessly connected to hotspots of illegal activity, creating a Radical Islamic *continuum* where the borders between tolerable Radical communities and terror supporters are unclear and ill-defined. Whether one is talking about the "Sunnah Gym" (Jugendschutz.net, 2017) or weapon-dealing *suq*, what they all have in common is the Salafi effort to refer to the Islam of the origins, bring its values in present society, and construct a future *umma* of unified *orthopraxis* (Adraoui, 2019). This tripartite effort, besides the important material element of financial and human contributions, has an essential symbolic and cultural dimension, especially in media spaces occupied mostly by younger people of the Diaspora in search of narratives to make sense of their condition at the margins of European society.

The multifaceted nature of descendent-generation youth, which far from being "stuck between two cultures" is capable of skillfully combining different cultural codes based on context and needs (Vertovec & Rogers, 1998) leaves its mark in RIWCs: Western pop culture is always combined with Radical Islamic messages to make them more appealing and "cool" (Jugendschutz.net, 2017), through photoshopped pictures, sticker packs depicting beheadings or *mujaheddin* that can then be used in Telegram chats, and memes are both the product of the intersectional nature of Diasporic identities (through the interaction of the European and Muslim presences) and essential passages in the construction of a *complete* Salafist identity, that doesn't limit itself to worship and fight but rather encompasses all aspects of life, humor included, to build a closed-off and completely independent imaginary.

Bellar et al. (2013) studied the significance of memes (defined by them as a *"Highly visual and emotive form of communication that employs pop culture images with succinct messages to communicate in often humorous ways"*) and Internet humor in religious communities. Internet humor, according to the authors, can be divided in three broad categories based on intent: *"playfulness"* memes rely on traditional "humor for humor's sake"; *"incongruity"* jokes are based on surreal juxtapositions of unrelated or conflicting elements; and *"superiority"* memes, lastly, rely on humor at the expenses of *another*, building up the identity of a "superior group" by

differentiating it from the constructed other (Bellar et al., 2013). Comparing different religious web communities, the authors note how, compared to other religious groups, "Islamic" memes require high levels of both pop and religious literacy (both found in descendent generation youth), often featuring specific Arabic words or historical references side by side with pop culture archetypes. Islamic memes, as a whole, display a higher tendency towards *parochial humor* (also known as "inside jokes"), hereby a given joke is only understandable after some degree of socialization into the group identity that produced it (Bellar et al., 2013).

Figure 1: An example of highly parochial humor in Islamic memes (Source: Sharia Is Superior Telegram Channel).

The findings of the aforementioned study are confirmed by an anecdotal exploration of Islamic Telegram channels, the content of which can be useful to provide examples of the phenomena observed in other studies: "Sharia Is Superior [M Inc.]" is an English-language Telegram channel with more than 2000 subscribers, mainly posting "Islamic memes" (even though, as already showed, they are frequently accompanied by emotional war videos, fundraisers and external links). Virtually all memes posted on the channel fall within the third category of Internet humor: superiority. Whether against "liberal" Muslims, infidels, gay people, or supporters of democracy, the entire "humorous" value of the memes is supposed to come from the mocking of members of the "out-group", whilst the "True Muslim" is depicted as a strong, masculine and uncompromising. Memes in general are often based on the same images (or variation of images) on which to write different texts to create an individual meme. A prominent example of these "families of memes" are those featuring "Chad", a stylized drawing of a stereotypical Germanic man, with strong facial features and a beard (Know Your Meme, 2011; 2019).[1] The Chad archetype is used in a variety of formats, almost invariably of the "superiority meme" kind: a popular choice is to compare "Chad"

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[1] "Know Your Meme" is a popular website featuring the largest meme database on the Internet. It was chosen as reference for information on memes in the 2013 study by Bellar et al.

with a "Virgin" embodying all the undesirable out-group features the meme author wishes to mock or ridicule (Know Your Meme, 2018). The vast majority of the memes featured on "Sharia Is Superior" are based on the "Chad" archetype. What is fascinating about these pictures, however, is not just the complete dominance of superiority humor, which by sharpening the lines between *in* and *out* reveals the ongoing process of identity construction outlined in the rest of this thesis. In a fascinating feat of reconstructive imagination, the blonde, Germanic Chad is *Islamized*, with its skin, nose, and beard modified through photo editing apps and an added headscarf typical of Muslim men (Sharia Is Superior [M Inc.] Telegram Channel, 2022), and the same is true for virtually every other meme format shared on the channel. Western cultural codes and archetypes are thus appropriated by Radical Islamists for their own cultural project, *creolizing* and *hybridizing* exogenous symbolisms in an act of *"performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes"* (Hall, 1990). The construction of what Hall called a "Diaspora aestethic" necessitates a process of negotiation and appropriation of some elements of the imposed regimes of representation to be genuine, as they form an integral part of Diasporic identity. The creative process of construction of a global *umma*, the "return to Africa" of Radical Islamists, must pass through the theoretically "impure" and "innovative" symbolisms of the host society, as even the construction of an "Islamic cool" or Islamic humor cannot ignore the reality of the partly European socialization of Diasporic youth.

Figure 2: An example of Islamically appropriated "Chad meme" (Source: Sharia is Superior Telegram Channel).

Conclusion

The Muslim Diaspora in Europe is a movement of enormous historical significance. Bringing millions of Muslims, with their diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, in the hearth of a continent whose very cultural identity was partly built on opposition to them, was sure to have drastic consequences for all involved. Diasporic Muslims live in a state of constant negotiation of their identity, between a "Muslim Presence" full of its own divisions and contradictions and a "European Presence" that permeates all aspects of their daily existences, from regimes of representation to political hierarchies, up to the very space that migrants and their descendants inhabit and -within the limits of what is allowed by the dominant group- appropriate.

The diversity in countries of origins, host cultures, education and housing arrangements within the Diaspora makes the construction of a unified Islamic identity in Europe a complex exercise of collective memory and symbolic construction. The youth of the second, third and all descendant generations are actors of great salience in this feat of constructive imagination. Their intersectional cultural toolkit, combined with their declining attachment to ethnic identity and strife towards "authentic" narratives makes them cultural innovators and produces a demand for community that Radical Islamists, with their utopian project of a global, pure *umma* inspired by the values and strict *orthopraxis* of the first three generations of Muslims (much like the imagined "Africa" of Caribbean identity), can easily respond to, with an incredibly vast cultural imaginary.

Internet plays a key role in this effort, unifying Muslims from all around the Diaspora and the rest of the world and providing alternative sources of religious authority from those of old *imams* who have a hard time communicating with younger people who often do not even speak their same language. The efforts of both Jihadism and Political Salafism are sustained by a complex, ever-evolving infrastructure of websites, social media and messaging apps accounts and channels ranging from the fairly innocuous to the outright illegal. Web communities, in particular, combine anonymity and desire for belonging in a complex system where the salience of individuality compared to group identity decreases drastically, favoring the emergence of in-group/out-group dynamics.

As already shown, these communities are many and sometimes extremely different from each other. What they all have in common, whether through "Islamic Web Design" or reappropriated memes, is a symbolic and syntactic array of "codes" and design elements that provide an essential contribution to the identity construction of the global *umma*. Hybridity and creolization, whether Radical Islamists are aware of it or not, are some of the biggest sources of material for the cultural identity of the global radical *umma*, as the identities of the actors of this newly crafted community are themselves products of intersecting and interacting imaginaries. Benedict Anderson (as cited in

Hall, 1990), argued that *"Imagined Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined"*. The global *umma* of Radical Islam, whether through *Hijra* calendars next to Gregorian ones, memes, *Sunnah gyms* or Q&A *fatwa* websites, mediates the construction of its identity through the use of creolized aesthetic codes, or *styles,* attempting its "return to Africa" while remaining inextricably tied to the West.

Abstract

La seconda metà del ventesimo secolo ha visto milioni immigrati di religione musulmana arrivare nel cuore dell'Europa, dal Nord dell'Inghilterra a Milano, passando per Parigi, il Belgio e le città tedesche. Oltre alla grande importanza che questo fenomeno migratorio ha avuto per i paesi ospitanti, i quali si sono trovati a dover gestire una diversità etnica e religiosa per molti totalmente sconosciuta, o comunque sempre situata *al di fuori* dei loro "territori metropolitani"; la Diaspora musulmana è stata un passaggio fondamentale nello sviluppo dell'Islam contemporaneo, e, ovviamente, nelle vite dei migranti stessi. Il concetto stesso di Diaspora musulmana, tuttavia, ha le sue radici in una chiave di lettura fondamentalmente europea: le migrazioni dei musulmani in Europa sono stati prima di tutto movimenti *etnici*, e dunque etnicamente differenziati da paese a paese. La stragrande maggioranza dei "musulmani" tedeschi è di origine turca, e lo stesso si applica per i pakistani nel Regno Unito e, in misura minore, per gli algerini in Francia. La "coscienza diasporica", per gli immigrati musulmani in Europa, emerge più per via di una serie di comuni esperienze che per una reale unità originaria. Lo spazio diasporico, che per molti immigranti e i loro discendenti consiste di enclave etniche ghettizzate ai margini dello spazio urbano abitato dai "nativi", produce da un lato meccaniche di isolamento e separazione, e dall'altro dà origine ad un bisogno generalizzato di autorità religiose, che nei quartieri "riappropriati" d'Europa sono spesso assenti o importati, e dunque non fluenti nelle lingue locali che la maggior parte dei giovani parla. Questa tesi si pone lo scopo di studiare la nascita ed evoluzione di un'identità culturale musulmana (e dunque non etnica) negli spazi islamici radicali, concentrandosi in particolare sul ruolo di Internet nell'utilizzare simbolismi, codici estetici e immagini per "riunificare" la *umma* (comunità di fedeli) islamica in un unico immaginario totalmente alternativo a quello europeo/occidentale.

Nel primo capitolo, viene esposta la "teoria delle presenze" proposta dal sociologo Stuart Hall (1990) per analizzare l'identità culturale creola nei Caraibi. Secondo Hall, laddove una diaspora ha portato popoli diversi a vivere in uno spazio terzo, spesso sotto il giogo di un'etnia/cultura dominante; l'identità culturale del soggetto diasporico finisce per essere definita proprio dall'interazione e negoziazione che avviene necessariamente tra lo spazio occupato, la cultura dominante, e la cultura ancestrale del soggetto stesso (spesso sotto forma di "casa immaginata"

piuttosto che come precisa ricostruzione storica). Il modello di Hall viene applicato alla Diaspora musulmana, e questo processo di adattamento supporta da un lato una maggiore comprensione delle meccaniche di potere proprie della cultura dominante nello stabilire lenti "predefinite" attraverso le quali le comunità immigrate sono lette (e, spesso, finiscono per *leggersi*); mentre dall'altro espone punti di tensione e differenza con la situazione della Diaspora africana: la memoria storica del mosaico etnico che compone il "mondo musulmano" è ben più recente e viva dei distanti ricordi dei popoli che abitavano il continente africano nel sedicesimo secolo, quando iniziò la pratica del commercio triangolare. Qualunque concetto di "presenza musulmana" possa essere fornito, esso conterrà sempre al suo interno una tensione intrinseca, causata dal rapporto spesso problematico tra identità etnica e religiosa. Il secondo punto di distacco con l'esperienza caraibica è quello del "terzo spazio". L'America, continente (o meglio, continenti) *svuotato* dai coloni europei, è terra straniera per i dominatori tanto quanto per i dominati: eco lontane dei popoli precolombiani riecheggiano in alcuni aspetti della realtà contemporanea nei Caraibi, ma quasi tutto è scomparso. L'Europa, invece, è la madrepatria della cultura egemone della Diaspora musulmana: per questi immigrati non esiste un luogo terzo, e la "presenza europea" permea lo spazio tanto quanto i sistemi valoriali, i codici rappresentativi e le gerarchie. La stessa definizione di "europeo", un termine che fu storicamente utilizzato per distinguere gli eserciti cristiani dall'invasore moro nella battaglia di Poitiers, pesa sui migranti di religione musulmana come un simbolo di un'estraneità che sembra essere irrisolvibile in quanto derivante dalle stesse identità dei due gruppi culturali riavvicinati spazialmente dalle migrazioni di massa.

Una volta completata questa premessa teorica, il secondo capitolo è dedicato ad una descrizione generale delle condizioni materiali della diaspora europea: la storia della migrazione musulmana in Europa segue traiettorie diverse in base al paese ospitante e la sua specifica identità culturale. Paesi come Francia e Regno Unito hanno ricevuto per la stragrande maggioranza immigrati provenienti da loro ex-colonie, mentre la Germania, ad esempio, ha attratto *Gastarbaiter* (lavoratori ospiti) da paesi con cui non aveva alcun legame storico (principalmente la Turchia) attraverso accordi bilaterali. Paesi naturalmente multietnici come il Regno Unito hanno avuto meno difficoltà, per certi versi, ad inserire i nuovi immigrati in una più grande comunità politica rispetto alla Francia, il cui *ethos* centralista, laicista ed assimilazionista è inevitabilmente in forte tensione con una comunità immigrata che legge prima di tutto in termini religiosi, e che in nessun modo può essere considerata francese se non rinuncia a tutto ciò che la rende "altro". In Germania, una comunità inizialmente interpretata (seppur con canoni non certo lusinghieri) etnicamente è sempre più vista come "musulmana" o "islamica", un'evoluzione generalizzabile in qualche misura a tutto il

continente e che trae le sue origini nell'11 settembre e nell'esperienza della "War on Terror". Il capitolo è completato da una descrizione delle diverse modalità di stanziamento adottate nei vari paesi ospitanti, dalle *banlieues* di Parigi ai centri città dell'Inghilterra settentrionale. Ciò che accomuna situazioni molto diverse tra loro è una situazione diffusa di segregazione etnica, maggiore persino di quella di altri gruppi immigrati di religione non musulmana. La creazione di "ghetti" o enclave etniche porta a un discreto numero di vantaggi, come una relativa protezione da fenomeni diffusi di razzismo nel resto dello spazio urbano o la vicinanza di negozi halal e centri culturali islamici, ma è allo stesso tempo un motore di esclusione sociale e svantaggio economico: i discendenti degli immigrati di prima generazione, in particolare, navigano lo spazio diasporico utilizzando codici culturali diversi e sovrapposti, e spesso desiderano emanciparsi dall'Islam dei loro genitori. La loro particolare condizione "ibrida" (per quanto questo termine abbia implicazioni potenzialmente problematiche), e il loro distacco da vecchie fonti di autorità religiosa che spesso non parlano nemmeno la loro stessa lingua, li rende soggetti privilegiati nella ricerca di un Islam "de-etnicizzato".

L'ultimo capitolo, infine, si apre con un tentativo di definizione dell'Islam radicale, o Salafismo, e del suo progetto culturale di una *umma* pura, unita, e ispirata dall'ortoprassi delle prime tre generazioni di musulmani. Questo Islam di ispirazione apertamente transnazionale, se non sovranazionale, ha fatto buon gioco delle tecnologie dell'informazione come internet, dove ha stabilito una presenza decisamente massiccia: tra siti di *e-fatwa*, dove studiosi della legge islamica salafiti forniscono risposte estreme e chiuse a qualunque forma di compromesso a domande su come gestire la vita di tutti i giorni; a forum che condividono testi fondamentali del jihadismo e connettono tra loro islamisti radicali; account Twitter a sostegno dell'ISIS; fino a canali Telegram di meme islamisti o di fitness "islamico". Le comunità radicali islamiche su internet si differenziano per piattaforma scelta, metodo di fruizione e livello di estremismo. Sono tuttavia accomunate da una serie di codici estetici, simbolismi e elementi di web design che li distinguono come "autenticamente islamici". L'estetica di un'identità culturale è uno dei pilastri fondamentali del suo stesso processo di formazione, e nella costruzione culturale di una *umma* sovranazionale, utenti internet Salafiti generano nuovi codici estetici, a metà tra una ripresa di canoni dei primi anni dell'Islam e le più recenti tendenze occidentali. Consapevolmente o meno, il ritorno all'Islam delle origine passa dunque per simbolismi e pratiche fondamentalmente *ibridate*, frutto di quello stesso incontro problematico tra Europa e Islam che ha prodotto le nuove generazioni di musulmani europei, i quali ben lungi dall'essere "incastrati" tra due mondi si muovono tranquillamente attraverso codici culturali che possono cambiare o sovrapporre in base alle necessità. Dalla loro sensibilità multiforme, dunque, emerge l'estetica della *umma* Salafita.

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