

The Effects of Secularizing Islam: The Case of a Franco-Maghrebi Activist-Intellectual

The Danish Cartoons in France

On March 22 2007, a court in Paris ruled that the publication of the so-called Danish cartoons by a French satiric journal, *Charlie Hebdo*, did not constitute a transgression of “the legitimate limits of freedom of expression”. More particularly, it asserted that the cartoons could not be considered “injurious” against a person or group of persons defined by their ethnic, national, racial or religious origin as had been argued by the plaintiffs.¹

The case against *Charlie Hebdo* had been brought to court by a group of Muslim federations, notably the two major French Muslim federations which, on this occasion, acted in rare harmony. These are the Algerian Federation of the *Grand Mosque of Paris* and the Union of Islamic Organisations of France – the UOIF – which is usually regarded as being close to the Society of Muslim Brothers. Both organisations cooperate quite closely with state authorities, since they are major constituents of the French Council of Muslim Worship – CFCM – which was created in 2003. The decision to sue the journal *Charlie Hebdo* had been taken in fact by the CFCM collectively.

This legal action was the third attempt by French Muslim groups to seek legal redress against the cartoons. The court’s renewed rejection of the law suit did not surprise many observers. What is more interesting than the court’s decision was the fact that it explicitly asserted that the cartoons *were* shocking to Muslims and *did* hurt what it called their “sensibilities”. However, in the court’s opinion, nothing could be done about it, since the right to free speech weighed more heavily than Muslim sensibilities. The court’s reference to Muslim sensibilities was widely disseminated in the media and similar claims had in fact been made previously by politicians and journalists.

One Muslim who very much disagreed with this type of statement about Muslim sensibilities is Mohamed Louizi, the activist-intellectual I want to speak about today. I want to discuss this case in order to think about how we can conceptualize French secularism and how we can study the processes of mutual determination between France’s secular order and Islam. I will concentrate on the case of one person, since I am particularly interested in understanding how certain macro-level developments – the broad public debate on radicalism and the state-conducted process of institutionalizing Islam – impact and shape specific micro-contexts in which intellectual and associational projects by Muslims are conceived and realized. Louizi’s reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy will give us a first idea of the power context which triggers his writings and which, at the same time, he seeks to transform through them. This context is defined not only by a secular order understood as a separation of state and religion or as a set of restrictions which are placed on religions in the public sphere. The Danish cartoon affair in France provides one example to show that the application of the laws of separation implies first of all the controversial identification of the properties distinctive of a religion and its followers. To put it more strongly, the case indicates – as many studies have pointed out previously – that secularism is not only about the separation of religions and the state, but first of all about constructing a specific religion which is then to be differentiated from other spheres of society.

Who is Louizi, then?

Louizi was born and raised in Casablanca. In 1998, at the age of 20, he came to France to continue his university studies in natural sciences in Lille, in northern France.

¹ See http://www.droitdesreligions.net/pdf_tgi/20072203.pdf for an excerpt from the court’s decision and previous legal discussions.

Shortly after his arrival in Lille, Louizi had become associated with a group called Muslim Students of France, which was created in 1993 by the UOIF, and which was conceived as the equivalent of Christian and Jewish Student groups. Louizi remained associated with the group – and was for some time its president – till 2002 when he joined the UOIF as an active member. This is to say that he followed a year-long series of seminar-meetings where prospective members – under the guidance of an active member – gather to read the Quran, selected writings of Hassan al-Banna and engage in debate.

After leaving the student organization and joining the UOIF, Louizi takes on various functions in the mosque association in the suburb of Lille where he lives; this association is also affiliated with the UOIF. He joins the board of administrators and actively participates in the preparation for the construction of a purpose-built mosque. The idea to replace the factory site which now serves as prayer room with a mosque had been developed by him and some associates already when he was still working with Muslim Students of France, he claims. Relatively soon after joining the associations, first conflicts arise with his fellow administrators and the regional branch of the UOIF in Lille and his relationship to the association and the UOIF in general becomes strained to the point that in 2006 he resigns from his functions and is subsequently disinvited from attending the mosque. The exclusion from the mosque association constituted a major rupture in his life. Both he and his wife are former activists and the exclusion meant the breakdown of a good deal of their social network and led to continuing hostility towards him.

It appears that his conflicts with the mosque association arise both from his disagreement with the understanding of Islam disseminated in mosque circles and his general rejection of the inegalitarian structure of the mosque association which is symbolized for him in the figure of the imam.

Louizi's disagreement with the imam concerned notably the relationship between science, revelation and hadiths – he reproached the imam of uncritically disseminating Hadith standing in contradiction to science and Quran – and also the imam's heavy reliance on Hadith to the detriment of the Quran in the first place. Louizi expressed these views and his critique of the imam, it seems, frequently in the mosque milieu. According to Louizi, this led the imam to attack him during his sermons by referring to those who disrespect the Sunna – the so-called *Coranistes* – and who have fallen off from belief.

After leaving the UOIF movement, Louizi – who is working as a high-school teacher – starts to write in his pastime. He publishes a first book in December 2006 – the second manuscript was finished two weeks ago – and creates a weblog titled “Writing without censorship”.

The Danish Cartoons

It is on this weblog that he reflects upon the cartoon affair as it was played out in France.

Louizi, like various groups of ‘secular Muslims’, was unable to identify with the feelings prescribed to him by the court, French opinion makers and the official representatives of French Muslims as they are embodied in the CFCM. An amateur of cartoons himself, Louizi found out to his dismay that he wasn't supposed to laugh at the drawings because of his assumed Muslim sensibilities. He disagreed both with the court and the Muslim plaintiffs, since in his eyes the cartoons criticized only a specific interpretation of Islam, namely that of “political Islam” or, as he sometimes puts it more strongly, “anti-Islam”. Furthermore, he felt that his “belief in [Muhammad's] prophecy and in his moral qualities and human values” simply could not be disturbed by satirical drawings of this type. Both the fact that Muslim

federations went to court in this matter and their doing so in the name of French Muslims, did not meet his approval.²

From Louizi's point of view, the court's ruling in the cartoon affair is particularly frustrating, since the ruling not only contains a definition of Muslim sensibilities which he rejects, but it also reaffirms the status of the major Muslim federations as legitimate representatives of French Muslims. Indeed, other groups – such as the anti-racist MRAP – had been excluded from the trial, precisely because their entitlement to speak for Muslims and Muslim causes was not accepted by the court. According to Louizi, the court's validation of Muslim federations as spokespersons for French Muslims contributed to consolidate inegalitarian structures inside the Muslim community which, he believes, both stifle debate among Muslims and obscure the diversity of Muslim ways of living for outsiders.

It is important to point out that Louizi's critique of the major federations results not only from the fact that he feels misrepresented by them, although he does and this is clearly an important factor. Rather, his objection is also directed against the very principle of representing groups of persons in terms of general categories such as 'Muslim'.

His critique of such categories – *étiquettes* as he calls it – becomes understandable, once one considers how the increasing use of them has affected the social position of Muslims as French citizens. This can indeed be illustrated with reference to the court's ruling. In fact, the court's verdict constitutes both an act of recognition of Muslim sensibilities and the devaluation of them as factors which supposedly impede Muslims from full allegiance to France's fundamental legal values, notably free speech.

The court's emphasis of the right to free speech is not merely a reiteration of a hierarchy of legal norms, but also referred to a specific vision of the desirable characteristics of a French citizen, notably the capacity to transcend one's own personal background in debates. This property is both affirmed as essential to the functioning of public debate and it is directly opposed to Muslim sensibilities. Whereas those who laugh at the drawings keep alive an "old French tradition", in the words of Sarkozy, at that time minister of the interior, Muslims are because of their religious sensibilities declared unable to fully belong to France and to actively practise their citizenship.

Louizi's writings

Louizi's writings –and the very fact that he started writing – are profoundly determined by this inegalitarian context. It is a context in which he finds himself continually subjected to discourses – both by Muslims and other French – which prescribe specific ways of practising Islam in France, which assign him as a Muslim a marginal social position in France and which make it increasingly difficult for him to be recognized as a 'real' Muslim whether it is inside or outside the community.

Before suggesting some ways to read his publications in relation to this context, I would like to briefly present his intellectual production and outline some of his arguments, concentrating mainly on the first book which offers the most detailed presentation of this thinking.

The book is titled "The Mullahs of Consumption"; it was published in 2006 and contains a 200-page-study in Arabic with a 80-page French summary. The book's starting point is a fatwa issued in 1999 by the European Council for Fatwa and Research, the ECFR, which was created in 1997 by the umbrella organisation of which the UOIF is part of, the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe. The fatwa authorized the use of mortgages by Europeans

² Louizi, „De la caricature censurée (1)“, 23 March 2007.

Muslims for the purpose of buying a house and stimulated an important debate in various European countries and elsewhere. The ECFR's muftis had argued that the prohibition of interest-based financial transactions is suspended in case of "need" (*hâja*) which, in this case, was supposedly given because of the importance of housing property for family life and the relative unavailability of Islamic financial institutions in the so-called West. More generally, the fatwa is inspired by the notion that the interpretation of Islamic norms in Europe should take into account, to some degree, the exceptional minority condition of European Muslims. In fact, the fatwa was soon considered the paradigmatic example of the so-called jurisprudence of minorities which is propagated by some members of the ECFR and served a variety of authors including Louizi to position themselves in the debate on Islamic law in Europe.

Louizi's critique of the fatwa and the related proposal for an Islam-based activism against interest-based economic transactions distinguishes itself from other interventions into this debate, since it does not engage with the fatwa's argument on the level of jurisprudence. Rather, one of his aims in this ambitious book is to show that some of the basic legal categories of Islamic jurisprudence are in contradiction with the Quran itself. Louizi does not address Hadith literature in his analysis. While he refrains from stating explicitly that Hadiths are simply irrelevant to Muslims (and elsewhere he actually sometimes refers to them), he argues that Muhammad only transmitted God's law. According to him, the Quranic passage which describes the Prophet as the one who "make[s] lawful the good things of life and forbid[s] them the bad things" (VII:157), read in the broader context of the revelation, does not substantiate the dominant position that Muhammad's actions and sayings have a continued normative value. Instead, they should be seen a specific and contingent interpretation of God's law.

It is because of his exclusive reference to the Quran, that Louizi does not bother to question the controversial equation by the ECFR of the categories "need" and "necessity". This equation is, of course, crucial to its argument in favour of suspending the Quranic prohibition of interest, since the majority of scholars hold that only "necessity" – and not mere "need" – can make permissible what is illicit. Instead of discussing this question, he directly attacks the more fundamental notion that "necessity" makes law.

He thus starts by outlining the distinction between absolute and conditioned prohibitions in the Quran which he deduces from the fact that dietary rules can be suspended when no other food is unavailable, ablutions can be performed with sand in absence of water, and so forth. However, the conditional character of some Quranic injunctions is not taken as the foundation of a generally applicable legal mechanism for making exemptions to Quranic obligations. Rather, it is taken to indicate – and here he departs from the ECFR and others - that the Quranic verse "God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear" (II: 286) is in fact already realized. It is already realized in the sense that the exemptions and conditions specified in the Quran serve precisely to make *all* Quranic injunctions bearable for humans.

From this perspective, the exegetical efforts by scholars in this field are entirely dispensable. Furthermore, the scholar's interpretation of Islamic norms with reference to the category of "necessity" amounts in fact to the making of new laws which are not only in contradiction to specific Quranic injunctions, but more generally conflict with the understanding of God as sole law-maker. Extending these reflections somewhat further, Louizi describes contemporary and past scholars as the almost equivalent to priests and rabbis the Quran warns of – the difference between them, according to him, being "trivial" and only one of "form and decor" (168). Emphasizing the Quranic rejection of mediation between God and believer and refuting

the equation of the Quranic notion of *'ulama'* with any institutionalized social group of scholars, he argues that each individual is called upon and qualified to read and live the Quran individually and free of any external constraints. As to scholars, their role is reduced to that of a "warner" (*nadhir*), admonishing people not to transgress God's law (200-202).

The fatwa by the ECFR is also criticized in light of the specific societal context of France. While Louizi strongly rejects the way in which the ECFR generalizes about the "West" – and in this way obscures the variety of living conditions of European Muslims – he believes it is important to be aware of the incentives and constraints which structure French society and the ways in which Muslims live. One of these incentives, according to him, is that to consume goods for the sake of consuming.

Louizi argues that the fatwa de facto legitimizes a specific form of consumptionism – by making property a necessary condition for a pious life of Muslims. This averts the attention of Muslims from taking care of their spiritual needs and, more generally, it contributes to structure society according to criteria of wealth. In contrast to this, he argues that Muslims need to concentrate on these needs, be mindful of death and the afterlife if they want to lead a meaningful life.

In the concluding parts of the book, Louizi then starts out to describe various local or international initiatives which aim to establish frameworks for equal economic exchange and in this way offer opportunities for Muslims to respect the prohibition of interest-based interactions.

Il était une fois...

Two weeks ago, Louizi completed a shorter manuscript in French which is titled "Once upon a time...A Subordinate on the Road to Damascus". The book is presented as a critical biographical study of Abu Hurayra, the companion of the Prophet Muhammad who transmitted the greatest number of Muhammad's sayings to the following generations. Already during his lifetime, this led to charges of forgery against which he had to defend himself and it is this claim which the book investigates more thoroughly. [[The book starts with an examination of the date of conversion and the time span during which this companion actually can have been in the Prophet's proximity, it investigates the accusations by Aysha and other companions against him, discusses the story of the "magic cape" which supposedly explains his extraordinary memory, it examines his role in the consolidation of the Ummayyad Empire and investigates possible influences from Jewish and Christian sources on Hadith literature. // OUT?]]

Given the overriding importance of this transmitter for Hadith literature, Louizi believes that the critical study of his biography ultimately has the potential to collapse the entire edifice of mainstream Sunni Islam – in his words, it threatens to collapse a religion which is based notably on Hadith and which "emerged out of the arranged marriage between theology and politics and which continues to bear the marks of absolutism, totalitarianism and obscurantism" (Conclusion). His task in this broader venture is limited, as he states explicitly, namely to make available and summarize the existing Arabic literature on the topic. These studies, he considers, are by and large untranslated and are unavailable in French Islamic bookshops. His book thus seeks to fill in this gap and addresses a broader Muslim audience. Louizi takes pains to distinguish this text from the small number of "critical essay[s]" which one also finds in Islamic bookshops, but which are, according to him, "totally disconnected from the reality of the neighbourhood mosques" (Avant-Propos 6).

As in the previous book, Louizi stresses that his view is not intended to be authoritative in any sense and that he merely seeks to inform Muslims and invite them to reflection.

Mosquée dans la cité

Apart from these two books, Louizi has authored a number of articles published on his website which was inaugurated three months after the publication of the first book. The broader objective of the weblog is described by him as “introspection and self-critique and the centrepiece of the website is indeed a series of 12 articles published during one year, which is titled “The Mosque in the Polis (Mosquée dans la Cité)”.

Here, he details his experiences as an activist inside the UOIF and reflects in highly critical ways upon its political manoeuvring in the competition about the official representation of Muslims to the State. He also offers a reform proposal for French mosques which aims, in his words, at pluralizing them, opening them up to all French citizens and creating a space for egalitarian debate.

The weblog attracts a relatively significant number of visitors (about 50.000 hits in 15 months) who regularly post comments. Many of these comments are highly critical of Louizi’s opinions. His first book also sparked a long-ranging discussion on a prominent Islamic website, mejliss.com.

Suggestion for an analysis of Louizi’s writings

I now want to suggest a number of ways of reading Louizi’s writings in the specific context of the Muslim association at whose margins he is situated. This micro-context, which relates in indirect and complex ways to the broader secular order of France, both determines his writings and it is the object of his attempts to transform it.

From this perspective, I would argue that his writings are basically informed by two binary sets of objectives which stand in internal tension to each other.

Louizi seeks to radically democratize the community at the same time as he works to establish himself as a legitimate interlocutor to scholars. In this sense he acts a scholar. Likewise, he seeks to universalize Islam at the same time as he equates this universalism with very specific French standards of an acceptable public religion.

Democratizing the Community

First, his writings can be seen as an attempt to democratize the space of his local community and, more generally, the French Muslim community. The website “Writing without censorship” is, of course, a first attempt to create such a space, but, as I said, his ultimate aim is the old and new aim of creating a different type of mosque.

From his perspective, the main obstacle to achieving this end are the scholars – by which he designates any person competing for a position of privileged understanding of scripture. The scholars and more generally, the system of Islamic sciences which underlies and legitimates their function, impede democratization by conditioning the individual’s access to scriptures and the legitimacy of both institutions – scholars and Islamic sciences – is thus continually scrutinized and criticized by him.

Louizi as a wanna-be Muslim (Activist-Scholar)

However, while Louizi is concerned with demonstrating in a general manner the illegitimacy of the category ‘scholar’, he is equally or more concerned with initiating debates on specific topics both with scholars and believers. This reflects in part his interest in specific issues – such as that of the economy – which he seeks to raise inside a community where he is constrained to engage scholars even if the latter largely choose to ignore him. But more importantly, his writings are constantly permeated by the personal wish to establish his opinions as ones which can be legitimately debated inside the Muslim community. In this sense, his writings are simply an attempt to be recognized as someone other than a so-called Coraniste.

In the course of these attempts to diversify the ways in which one can be a Muslim, he is led to act to some degree just like other scholars. He acts as a scholar in the sense that he seeks to demonstrate and accumulate the resources necessary for being considered a legitimate interlocutor to scholars. His second book on hadith criticism can be seen from this perspective as an attempt to muster support for his views from more senior scholars from Arab countries. His consciousness of the need to ally with other scholars, as he readily admits, also shows in his selection of references. While he refers regularly to non-Muslim authors in various articles, he systematically refrains from quoting what he calls Orientalists in the course of his Hadith criticism. In this study, he also regularly points out that he references Sunni Muslims exclusively, in order to preempt being labelled a Shiite.

Universalizing Islam...

Thirdly, Louizi's writings are deeply permeated by the aim to restore Islam to its initial universality.

He grounds this aim in the belief that the Quran is entirely rational and addresses all humans. The urgency with which he advocates this view derives from his conviction that Muslims in France are in the process of being ghettoised, both by themselves and by part of the political elite. Here again, the scholars, as the perpetuators of the historical alliance between religion and power and the guardians of the Sunna, are singled out as main culprits. Both his critique of scholars and his rejection of Hadith are intended to render to Islam its relevance for contemporary life and to preempt its instrumentalisation by particular interest groups such as the UOIF and its political allies.

Or Making it Conform to the Dominant French Order?

It would be incorrect, however, to say that his writings only attempt to universalize Islam. Particularly his more autobiographical writings have incorporated the standard French view of the UOIF and political Islam more generally. His writings almost take on the aspect of a confessional act through which he seeks to clearly distance himself from his activist past. He argues that the UOIF's understanding of Islam is not compatible with the Republican order. Furthermore, in direct contradiction to his critique of the use of general categories such as Muslim or Liberal, designations such as "fundamentalist" or "political Islam" abound in his articles.

Conclusion

The case of Louizi demonstrates the utility of extending our study of French secularism and Islam beyond the question of how religion and state are separated from each other and how relations between the state and Muslim organisations are structured.

By confining ourselves to these two questions, we risk taking for granted that Islam is being practised inside hierarchical institutions that cooperate with the state.

A primary point in this analysis is thus to take into account how the state is implicated in the continual process of defining Islam, socially positioning Muslims and consolidating hierarchical structures in the Muslim community. To do so, is to understand how a Muslim like Louizi is being marginalized in France and which constraints shape his intellectual project.

Thank you for your attention.