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Inventing “Muslims in Europe”. Religion, culture and identity in the time of neoliberalism

To claim that Islamophobia is a form of xenophobia aimed at Muslims may seem a tautology. However, this apparent obviousness disappears if one considers more deeply what precisely the term “Muslims” denotes within it. As I want to show in the present article, the meaning of this term is far from unambiguous. It is especially visible in the context of European Islamophobia, which has become an important component of European attitudes towards immigrants and whose existence has been first noted in social sciences in the 1990s. The aforementioned ambiguity is associated not only with the fact that – as Polish examples from the recent years demonstrate – the victims of violence motivated by Islamophobia frequently become people who have little to do with Islam, such as Arab Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, citizens of Latin American countries or guests from Southern Europe. Indeed, what is significant is that the very collective category of “Muslims”, or, more specifically, the way it is now used in anti-Islamic discourses, at closer examination turns out to be, to a larger degree, an instrument of specific, politically conditioned practices of categorization of human diversity, rather than a simple representation of what is socially “given”. In the following text I would like to draw attention to the fact that the political salience of this category and its apparent self-evidence is a phenomenon that has a short history in a European context. What is more, I would like to argue that this history is strongly linked to the neoliberal direction that economic policies have taken in Europe in recent decades. I am convinced that it is worth to take a look at this history in order to understand mechanisms due to which references to religion and religion-based cultural identities have gained so much significance in Europe over the past decades, as well as have kindled violent controversies.

The basic conceptual framework of Islamophobic discourses assumes a binary opposition between "Islam" and "Europe" (or "the West"), both understood as unified and separate entities. Such a conceptual opposition makes it possible to construct Muslims as aliens and "outsiders" in Europe even when they are citizens of European countries, frequently born on their territory and well integrated into societies in which they live. Islamophobic discourses thus imply that "Muslims" constitute a kind of a separate ontological category. Accordingly, they are supposed to be a social subject that can be unambiguously designated, and whose nature is comprehensively defined by religion and "culture" shaped under the influence of that religion (by its very definition incompatible with "European culture"). There are many problems with such an approach to the issue. The most important of these is the fact that both in the European and in the global context, the followers of Islam do not constitute a group that could be indisputably described in the categories of common cultural belonging. It is enough to mention that, for example, European Muslims come from such diverse countries and regions as Pakistan, Turkey, North Africa or the Middle East; some of them, such as Tatars, the Muslim minority in Bulgaria or in the former Yugoslavia, are not immigrants or descendants of immigrants at all. Outside of Europe there are several dozen Muslim countries, whose populations speak languages belonging to different language groups, and which are organised in different kinship systems, family structures or economic relations, as well as moral standards. These countries most importantly pursue their own national interests anyway, and often remain in political conflict with each other. Despite the commonplace identification of Islam with the Arab world, the majority of Islam followers are not Arabs, and many of them have converted from other religions and are, simultaneously, "native" inhabitants of the United States or Europe. There also exist many religious differences between groups connected with Islam: the key divisions include those between Sunni and Shia Muslims (and many other, smaller varieties of Islam), as well as traditional and modernised followers, practicing Muslim believers and "cultural" Muslims, followers of political Islam and those for whom their faith does not have political implications, the proponents of folk Islam, which is closely connected with folklore, and those for whom Islam is, above all, an intellectual proposition. These differentiations could go on and on.

It is a fact that the intra-religious perspective, assumed by many believing Muslims, frequently causes them to emphasise a particular bond with the co-followers, which would result from common belonging to Muslim *umma*. However, the perspective of social sciences demonstrates that despite similarities and postulates of solidarity, there are a number of fundamental differences between Muslims, be it cultural, ethnic, language, political, economic, class, etc., which make any claims using the notion of "Muslim culture" – and the collective category of "Muslims" – pointless without further specifying, both in the scientific field and on the grounds of public discourse. In the present text I am particularly interested in the latter area. When referring to it, the questions which gain salience concern when, with what aim

and with what meaning these terms appear at all and become a significant discursive tool. This approach assumes that both are, in fact, social constructs, whose current meanings – so strongly connected with increasing anti-Islam tendencies – emerge in connection with political, social and economic conditions which shape the reality of today's Europe. Thus it is my thesis that every attempt at understanding Islamophobia, its sources, dynamics and results, necessitates the question of *how there exist* in Europe "Muslims" as an object of Islamophobic hostility or reluctance. This question does not mean negating the fact that following Islam may be an important component of group and individual identity. Rather, it denotes the need to consider why and in what way religious identification, which, after all, always constitutes only one of many dimensions of human personality and experience, has started to play a defining role in constructing the image of certain minorities in Europe.

The scholars I refer to later in the text concur that identifying immigrant minorities through the lens of their Muslimhood constitutes a phenomenon that has only been developing in Europe since the 1980s. Before that, these groups defined themselves – and were also perceived – mainly through their national and ethnic affiliations. Indeed, these affiliations denoted sharp lines of political and cultural divisions, which frequently reflected the conflict between, or within, the immigrants' countries of origin. However, the key factor that defined the social status of these groups, the methods of political mobilisation available to them and forms of participating in culture was their class affiliation and place within the structure of labour. Given that the majority of immigrants from outside Europe who appeared in European countries after the Second World War found employment in West European factories, as a collective they were treated, above all, as members of the working class. As Ferruh Yilmaz notes, "the immigrant worker" was just one of the signifiers of the struggle between social classes"¹. Only since the late 1980s this "immigrant worker" (or – "foreign worker") has started to slowly transform into a "Muslim immigrant"².

¹ F. Yilmaz *How the Workers Become Muslim. Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation in Europe*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2016, p. 69.

² It is worth noting here that "Muslim immigrants" as a figure symbolising both danger connected with "immigrants" as such, as well as the issue of their low economic status, resulting in a burden on national welfare systems, is characteristic for Europe in which Muslims are overrepresented in the economically weakest social strata. In the United States the paradigmatic "immigrant" is an unqualified Mexican or an in-comer from another Latin American country. American Muslims constitute a small minority of immigrants in that country, and, moreover, constitute a group that statistically has higher education and achieves a larger income than the non-Muslim majority. Official data shows, for instance, that 58% of American Muslims are college graduates, while the average for the entire population is 27%. J. Cesari, *Islamophobia in the West: A Comparison between Europe and the United States*, in: *Islamophobia. The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, J.L. Esposito, I. Kalin (eds.), Oxford University Press 2011, pp. 25, 27.

This transformation can also be observed in the Polish public discourse, despite the fact that immigrants from Muslim countries never constituted a statistically significant phenomenon in Poland. Before 1989, incomers from those countries, if they were not to be perceived through the lens of their national affiliations (or broader, ethnic ones, such as Arab), were treated mainly as representatives of the Third World or “developing countries”.

In Western European countries, the situation changes in the 1980s, when there begins something that could be called “the invention of Muslim identity”³. It is a process of the gradual constructing of “Muslims in Europe” as a separate entity – a social category defined by religious affiliation. It consists in including in the unified notion of “Muslims” groups and individuals for whom Islam was, beforehand, only one of many dimensions of existence, not always particularly important. In the European context, this process pertains to, above all, groups of extra-European origin and it has several correlated causes. They can be found both in the very dynamics of experience of minorities consisting of immigrants and their descendants, and in the changing ways in which these minorities are constructed in European public discourses.

One of the most obvious causes of the emergence of “Muslim identity” is the natural weakening of national identifications among groups whose ancestors were immigrants. For subsequent generations, born and raised in Europe, the bond with the parents’ or grandparents’ country of origin gradually loses its direct emotional meaning, although it may also be mythologised and it may remain an element of family heritage. As Olivier Roy shows, “Muslimhood” frequently becomes a new, alternative basis for their identity as representatives of a minority group in Europe; however, it is understood in a particular, cosmopolitan way. In this meaning, Islam is not perceived as “a cultural relic but as a religion that is universal and global and reaches beyond specific cultures, just like evangelicalism or Pentecostalism”⁴. In reference to this form of religiousness, Roy formulates an interesting observation: according to him, Islam, devoid of territory and torn from local traditions, constitutes a phenomenon that should be understood as a product of secularising processes and not an example of resistance towards them. Paradoxically then, affirming Muslim identity in such an iteration constitutes, rather, a proof of being torn from the culture of one’s ancestors than of being submerged in this culture – also because it is usually the subject of one’s individual choice and not the result of communal socialisation.

According to many scholars, a particular impulse to “invent Muslim identity” lay in Europe’s growing reluctance towards immigrants and their descendants, which

³ I have briefly mentioned this phenomenon in my other texts. Here I develop my earlier observations and provide an explanatory framework for them. See e.g. M. Bobako “Islamofobia – między „krytyką religii” a rasizmem kulturowym”, *Recykling Idei* 14, Winter 2012/2013.

⁴ O. Roy *Secularism confronts Islam*, Columbia University Press 2007, p. xi.

at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s took the form of anti-Islamic tendencies. Since then, these tendencies recur cyclically, becoming a constant element of European social reality. The reason for their flaring up can lie in particular political events, such as the international crisis caused by the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*; acts of Islamic terrorism; unrest and conflicts caused by anti-Muslim actions of Europeans, such as publishing caricatures of Muhammad; or recurring outbreaks of moral panic surrounding the issues connected with immigration processes and the influx of refugees from outside Europe. In this context, the case of Rushdie's novel (published in 1988, and in Poland in 1992), which played a particular role in the process of inventing "Muslim identity", deserves particular attention. It was one of the first events which antagonised Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe on such a large scale and contributed to framing Islam as a danger to freedom and "Western" identity⁵. Islam started then to function not only as a (fairly abstract) outside danger, but it also became an *inside* problem of the West. The conflict left the strongest imprint on social relations in the United Kingdom, where immigrants and their descendants found themselves placed on the spot and calls began for them to assimilate and accept the "Britishness" that they were supposedly contesting. Social effects of this antagonism are well reflected by the words of one of Muslim commentators who claimed that it was the events surrounding Rushdie's book that "made us realise, as a community, that we were primarily Muslims"⁶. This new way of perceiving diverse minority groups through the lens of their religious and cultural affiliation resulted in the fact of suddenly making "primarily Muslims" out of a group of people who, in sociological categories, could be separated by more than what connected them.

In the French context, where immigrant minorities mostly hail from the Arab Northern Africa, the reference point for the birth of politicised "Muslim identity" became the Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq. Given the increasingly religious perception of the Palestinian conflict (which, at the outset, was mostly a conflict of two nationalisms), treating it as an identity-related point of reference opened the route for redefining social conflicts and political identities in religious categories. It was tantamount to rejecting the non-religious language of integration and anti-racism present in the *beurs* activism in the 1980s. As Paul A. Silverstein writes, "If their older brothers and sisters saw their struggles as intrinsically local and based in a larger fight for civic rights in France, many of today's Franco-Maghrebi youth see themselves additionally (if not primarily) as transnational Muslim subjects in solidarity with

⁵ It is worth noting that "the case of Rushdie" overlapped in time with the beginning of the controversies that last until today, and which erupted in France around the issue of hijab worn by female students in public schools.

⁶ Quoted in: J. Birt, *Islamophobia in the construction of British Muslim identity politics*, in: *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, P. Hopkins, R. Gale (eds.), Edinburgh University Press 2009., p. 217.

oppressed Palestinians, Afghanis, and Iraqis”⁷. Silverstein emphasises that the framework for such identity processes in France lay in the history of anti-immigrant violence, also on the part of the police, government policy using the notion of Muslim suburbs as the areas of danger and anomy, and, above all, the dawn of the era of the “war on terror”. The latter resulted in police practices that invariably “interpellated” French people of Maghrebi origin as “Islamic terrorists”. As Silverstein writes, “the war [on terror] has operated on two fronts that have both reinforced Franco-Maghrebi identification as particularly Muslim subjects, and have positioned this subjectivity in opposition to French social-political belonging”⁸.

The abovementioned examples demonstrate that the emergence of “Muslims” in Europe as a separate entity is, above all, a result of complex political processes which shaped the social reality of European societies in the last few decades and which are also responsible for the development of Islamophobic attitudes. However, it ought to be kept in mind that Islamophobia does not come down to hate speech, xenophobic attacks or constructing an offensive image of Islam and Muslims. Indeed, it is also translated into systemic discrimination in the field of employment, education or access to housing. As the 2006 report prepared by the European Monitoring Center, *Muslims in the European Union. Discrimination and Islamophobia*, shows, unemployment among Muslim minorities in Europe is usually two to five times larger than the average for non-Muslim majority in their country of residence. This is partially a consequence of the lower social capital and education level of the members of these minorities; however, the report shows that discrimination is an important factor, as it results in excluding people with Muslim-sounding names in recruitment processes⁹. Discrimination is also pointed out as the reason for segregation in housing and the correlated need to use substandard premises¹⁰. Simultaneously, the report emphasises that, among all migrants, people associated with Islam are the ones most exposed

⁷ P.A. Silverstein, *The Fantasy and Violence of Religious Imagination: Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in France and North Africa*, in: *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, Andrew Shryock (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis 2010, p. 158.

⁸ P.A. Silverstein, *op.cit.*, p. 156.

⁹ The report references the results of social experiments whose aim was to estimate the chances of obtaining employment by Muslims. Among them is, for example, the action of the University in Paris, which in 2004 sent out standardised CVs making it possible to identify candidates as hailing from diverse social groups in response to 258 job advertisements for sales assistants. It turned out that people from Northern Africa had a 5 times smaller chance of receiving a positive reply. *Muslims in the European Union. Discrimination and Islamophobia*, European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ Such discrimination is visible in the refusal of sale or rent, imposing additional conditions when renting or using discriminatory criteria in providing social apartments. T. Choudry, *Muslims and Discrimination*, in: *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society*, S. Amghar, A. Boubekeur, M. Emerson, Centre for European Policy Studies 2008, p. 85.

to racism and discrimination¹¹. As the authors of the report conclude, "Many [European] Muslims, particularly young people, face limited opportunities for social advancement, social exclusion and discrimination which could give rise to hopelessness and alienation"¹².

The experiences signalled here which are part and parcel of the lives of European Muslims become an impulse for the development of a politicised "Muslim identity". As Jonathan Birt has it, "the common experience of Islamophobia creates a unique community of suffering, which conflates ethnically disparate communities as Muslims and creates an assertive Muslim identity politics. In this sense, Islamophobia provokes the constitution of assertive Muslim identities in the hegemonic public sphere"¹³. In this context, it becomes clear that political mobilisation around this identity has its sources not in Islam or Islamism as much as in modern Western ideas of equality and multiculturalism. In this sense, it constitutes a continuation of struggles for recognition and justice carried out by feminist, LGBT or anti-racist movements, although it also turns out to be problematic in many ways for these movements, for example because sometimes (not always) it takes on the shape of neo-traditionalism, which, seeking Muslim authenticity, finds it in anti-Western conservatism. In the British context the introduction of Muslim identities into the space of multicultural politics currently takes place with support from state institutions. Indeed, these institutions shape their policies of "social cohesion" to an increasingly larger degree on the basis of religious identities. One of the aims of such policy is the assimilation of Muslim minorities, as well as counteraction towards Islamic terrorism and building of moderate British Islam that could be controlled by the state. According to critical observers of abovementioned processes, this policy, carried out, for instance, through financial favouring of religious organisations, leads to a de-secularisation of British public space; it also contributes to supplanting the discourse of multiculturalism with the idea of multi-religiousness.¹⁴

However, the British context differs significantly from the French one, which has been shaped by a different tradition of understanding political community and citizenship. According to this tradition, the French republic treats its citizens, in general, as individuals defined in universalist terms and it does not perceive its particularist group affiliations as a factor significant for their citizen status. This especially pertains to religious affiliations, which, according to the *laïcité* rule, are supposed to remain strictly private. For this reason, as Olivier Roy claims, in France the "Muslim identity" is being constructed on the sub-state level, in the space of local

¹¹ EUMC 2006, p. 46.

¹² EUMC 2006, p. 8.

¹³ J. Birt, op. cit., p. 217.

¹⁴ P. Patel, *Cohesion, Multi-Faithism and the Erosion of Secular Spaces in the UK: Implications for the human rights of minority women*, IDS Bulletin Volume 42, no 1, January 2011.

religious communities, and on the supra-state level, in the sphere of transnational relations, in which, thanks to new forms of communication, new forms of religious communities are created¹⁵. It seems, however, that the rule of the secularity of the state is subject to occasional limitations due to practical reasons. Undoubtedly, this was the case with the 2003 creation of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) by the initiative of Nicolas Sarkozy, modelled on a similar association that represented French Jews. Creating the Council, whose aim was to create a platform for communication between the government and the “Muslim community,” can be read as recognising this community as a separate, collective social subject. However, it does not necessarily mean political subjectivation of the members of this community. Indeed, as Esther Benbassa notes, the very institutional formula of the Council “is an index of the government’s inability to imagine Arabs outside of their religion – effectively depriving them of any purely political standing”¹⁶. Indeed, as it seems, in the French context, reducing collective interests and the identity of the Arab minority to the religious dimension is tantamount to expelling these interests and identities outside the area of legitimate political claims¹⁷.

Thus, as sketched above, inventing “Muslim identity” is a process that reveals itself both on the level of identity strategies assumed by Muslim minorities (and, in some contexts, also on the level of institutional politics, which attempts to adapt to these strategies), and in the sphere of anti-Muslim discourses in Europe. In this context, it is worth noting the paradox connected with the process. It consists in that the logic of the group self-identification of a minority turns out to be synchronous with the logic of exclusion and stigmatisation, which aims precisely at the aforementioned minorities. What I mean here is that the categories in which excluded communities define their identity in the case of the process under discussion overlap with categories which the dominating groups use to distinguish and stigmatise these very communities. On the one hand, some minority groups in Europe increasingly

¹⁵ O. Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007.

¹⁶ E. Benbassa, *Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Racism: Europe’s Recurring Evils?*, in: M. Bunzl, *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Hatreds Old and New in Europe*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago 2007, pp. 86-87.

¹⁷ As Marta Widy-Behiesse writes, the Council does not play a significant role in the Muslim community in France, perhaps also for the reason Benbassa points out. Cf. *Islam i muzułmanie w laickiej Francji*, in: *Islam w Europie. Bogactwo różnorodności czy źródło konfliktów?*, M. Widy-Behiesse (ed.), Dialog, Warszawa 2012. Conversely, Olivier Roy claims that the weakness of Muslim organisations is visible in the entire Europe; generally, they are not treated by Muslims themselves as their “natural” political representation. According to the author, in many countries it is even difficult to use the term “community”, due to their being rooted in other structures creating European societies, they are, rather, at most “populations”. O. Roy *Islamic Terrorist Radicalisation in Europe*, in: *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society*, S. Amghar, A. Boubekeur, M. Emerson, Centre for European Policy Studies 2008, p. 56.

define themselves through reference to Islam (or the culture denoted by this religion), on the other – they are increasingly identified as "Muslim" and discriminated for this reason. We are thus dealing with a situation in which cultural or cultural and religious issues begin to be perceived as key determinants of social relations, simultaneously becoming central topics in public discourse. In this sense we are confronted with a phenomenon that can be described as *culturalisation* of public discourse.

A precise analysis of this process can be found in Ferruh Yilmaz's book entitled, tellingly, *How the Workers Become Muslim. Immigration, Culture, and Hegemonic Transformation in Europe*. The author's main thesis is that the culturalisation of the public discourse in Europe and the creation of "Muslims" as a separate social category is a result of stepping away from the politics focusing on the issue of social justice and redistribution. Yilmaz's research pertains to Denmark; however, as confirmed by authors he references who deal with the German or the French context, the transformation described in the book also took place in other European countries. It consisted in that as a result of politics focusing on cultural issues, immigrants stopped being perceived through the lens of their class affiliation and became defined as "aliens". Consequently, they started to be perceived as a danger to the Danish national identity and their right to make use of the help of the Danish welfare system. As Yilmaz writes, "until the mid-1980s, public debate about welfare state had not been preoccupied with the ethnic homogeneity of the Danish nation, and the issue of immigration was subordinated into the fundamental divide between labor and capital"¹⁸. The situation changed together with the aforementioned invention of the figure of the "Muslim immigrant", who took place of the "foreign worker". According to the author, this was also the moment when the welfare state started to be defined in ethnic and cultural categories.

Yilmaz evidences that the sources of this transformation can be found in the processes that reframed the economic reality of the 1980s. It was thus, above all, the expansion of neoliberal policies, which – as a project to which, supposedly, "there is no alternative" – came to be accepted also by many liberals and the left. This resulted in the marginalisation of the heretofore dominating language of redistribution and created space for the anxieties connected with the increasingly evident consequences of neoliberalism (such as the shrinking of the welfare state or instability of employment) to be expressed in the culturalist language of anti-immigrant xenophobia. In the context of the 1980s Denmark, the catalyst for the transformation described by the author was the moral panic caused by Danish rightwing groups (although not without the participation of the mainstream media) surrounding the influx of refugees who were escaping the Iraq-Iran war, the repressions of the theocratic Iranian regime or the Sri Lanka war. The framing of the immigration issue as focused on cultural differences was soon accepted by the entire political spectrum, not only by the proponents of the

¹⁸ F. Yilmaz, *op.cit.*, p. 68-69.

anti-immigrant xenophobia, but also by their opponents, who called for inter-cultural tolerance and dialogue¹⁹. The hegemony of cultural and identity discourse also influenced the forms of political mobilisation of immigrants and their descendants. As Yilmaz demonstrates, they ceased to organise on the grounds of nationally or ethnically defined workers' associations (e.g. Moroccan Association or the Union of Workers from Turkey) which were connected with leftwing political parties, and their social and political activities shifted towards supranational organisations of cultural or religious character²⁰. This change also pertained to individual strategies of being present in the public life – as frequently people previously not associated with religion began to highlight their Muslim affiliation in order to gain public visibility and a political profile²¹.

Yilmaz illustrates the process of gradual culturalization of immigrant identities and growing importance of their religious dimension with his own experience. His words are worth quoting at length: "I went to Denmark in 1979 as a young, left-wing activist who had no idea what the term "identity" meant. Within two decades, I became a "Muslim": by the mid-1990s, I was answering yes when people asked me if I were a Muslim. I said yes despite the fact that I have never identified myself with anything religious. On the contrary, my political formation had made me think of religion as the opium of people. I also "learned" not only about the term "identity" but that identity is anchored in culture as a set of traditions, norms, and values, although they never made sense to me: I did not share more traditions, norms, and values with people from the same ethnic background than with my Danish friends.

My "conversion" had nothing to do with religion but with the central place immigration took in the public debate, which increasingly organized public and private talk around immigration and its impact on society. Not only did immigration move into the center of public debate, it also influenced how we talked about it and how we positioned ourselves in the debate".

The main value of the perspective sketched by Yilmaz consists in the fact that by reconstructing the genealogy of notions such as "Muslim immigrants", it makes it possible to connect the symbolic and cultural factors with the sphere of historically conditioned global economic transformations that had shaped the social reality of contemporary Europe. In this perspective, key significance can be assigned to the fact that as a result of the neoliberal reorientation in economics, the European political imaginary came to be subordinated to the hegemony of rightwing discourses which

¹⁹ The left wing endorsement of culturalist language has been analysed by Nancy Fraser. See her *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on "Postsocialist" Condition*, Routledge, New York, London 1997 and Nancy Fraser & Axel Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, London, New York 2003.

²⁰ F. Yilmaz, op.cit., pp. 4, 30.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 3.

introduced cultural, or religious and cultural identity, as a dominating category. It meant that the language focused on identities started to be the main idiom of articulating social conflicts. It superseded the earlier language of class interests, which was also connected with the shift of interests from "rights" to "values" and "norms". As a result, solving problems whose genesis lay in cultural differences started to be perceived as one of the main tasks of politics. In this context, differentiating and classifying people as either "native" and thus legitimate members of particular European societies, or "aliens", mainly immigrants and their descendants, became a key issue. Perceiving immigrants in the category of a problem was closely connected with the fact that in the centre of the new political imaginary there was the notion of a lost communal harmony that had been affected with the arrival of the representatives of "foreign cultures".

However, it is worth emphasising that in Yilmaz's approach, the issue does not come down to the question of discourse, but, rather consists in the fact that the domination of the rightwing political imaginary has led to the creation of a new *social ontology*, structured by identity issues. The hegemonic strength of this new ontology is visible, among others, in that it is also strengthened by attempts at contesting it. An ironic example of that is how we strengthen the very framework that makes the existence of Islamophobia possible when we try to oppose anti-Muslim prejudices by means of cultural arguments. This happens, for instance, when we respond to stigmatising, contemptuous and hostile discourses and actions aimed at Muslims by proposing a policy of meeting and *intercultural* dialogue, broadening knowledge about Islam, building relations with *Muslims*, respecting their *difference*. It is difficult to doubt the ethical premises of such proposals or their educational value. However, it ought to be kept in mind that the struggle against anti-Muslim xenophobia focused on the simple reversal of Islamophobic valorisations does, indeed, contribute to ontologising the "separatedness" of Muslims. As Yilmaz points out, "even when people do not engage in fear-mongering around Islam and express sympathetic »attitudes«, the new ontological horizon constrains the way they navigate the new social landscape"²². It is because "the new hegemonic formation imposes [the limits] on political subjects even when they try to oppose its ideological propositions. In the new political environment, both the political establishment and those who claim to challenge the populist Right's vision of society nevertheless base their arguments on the same ontology of the social, creating an epistemic collusion between right and left and even imprisoning the critique within the boundaries of the new ontology of the social"²³.

These observations have fundamental implications for reflection over Islamophobia, while connecting it closely with the question regarding the contemporary

²² Ibidem, p. 19.

²³ Ibidem, p. 30.

functioning of religion as a category of affiliation. Indeed, they demonstrate that analysing Islamophobia cannot come down to diagnosing the xenophobic character of Islamophobic attitudes and discourses, but, rather, it has to focus on studying the very conditions that make these discourses possible. Thus, this pertains not only to studying the practices, increasingly common in Europe, of marking out Muslims as alien and inferior, but, above all, to revealing the mechanisms of constructing them as a separate social entity, and therefore, an apparently separate category of people, whose identity, interests, ways of thinking and acting may be completely and exhaustively defined by their religion. As I have tried to show, these mechanisms cannot be analysed in separation from wider socio-political processes and especially economic transformations that have taken place in recent decades, both in Europe and globally.

Translation by Nelly Stehlau and Ewa Bodal

The article was written and translated as a part of a research project funded by the National Science Center, Poland (decision DEC-2011/03/B/HS1/01693).

Monika Bobako – INVENTING “MUSLIMS IN EUROPE”. RELIGION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE TIME OF NEOLIBERALISM

In present-day Europe a category of "Muslims" appears at the center of the most heated social and political debates. It is because a group defined by its links with Islam has been growingly perceived as a threat to the European religious and cultural identity as well as "Western values" and the socio-political order that is supposed to stem from them. In this context one can observe development of a variety of Islamophobic discourses that are primarily targeted at immigrants and communities that have immigrant roots. What all these discourses have in common is a conviction that "Muslims" constitute a separate entity, a social category of people with shared identity, interests and goals, that can be easily identified and singled out on the basis of a criterion that is a religion and a religiously defined culture.

In the paper I want to problematize a category of "Muslims" (as it has been functioning in the European public discourses), question its seeming self-evidence and argue that in fact it is a social construct whose exceptional present-day salience is strongly linked to a direction that Western political thinking and economic policies have taken since the 1980s. It will be my thesis that special meanings and currency that this category has acquired is a by-product of wider processes of "culturalization" of the public discourse in Europe. Following theorists such as Nancy Fraser or Ferruh Yilmaz I will claim that this "culturalization" has been related to widespread adoption of the neoliberal economic policies and is a result of a new way of framing of social conflicts and divisions that these policies have imposed. However, my analysis will not be limited to pointing to *discursive* conditions of the present-day prominence of the category of "Muslims" in Europe. I will also demonstrate how – against the background of the "culturalization" of the public discourse in Europe – one can discern progressing mobilization of various minority, immigrant groups around a marker of "Muslimness". In the paper I will discuss the

most important events and factors that have contributed to this mobilization and argue that it has led to something that might be called "inventing Muslims in Europe".

The most general purpose of the paper is considering how religion as *a category of belonging* has been functioning in the context of cultural, political and economic changes of the last few decades in the West.