

The Significance of Signs through Some Selected Qu’ranic Texts: A Unifying Means or a Dividing Line?

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ABSTRACT

Along the history of mankind, Islamic religious signs have been used by man. They have allowed Muslims to establish an individual relationship with some metaphysical powers. At the same time, they have helped him express a sense of belonging to particular religious community, Islamic religious symbols and their representations constitute no exception. They are endowed with some unifying and dividing aspects which are seemingly the product of that traditional confrontation between hard-line believers and their moderate or more liberal co-religionists. In the current world situation, these signs seem to be under the effects of a variety of internal and external dynamics, making them a vital means in a globally-waged culture war between East and West, currently termed North and South

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend”

Martin Luther King Jr.

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1-INTRODUCTION

Religious signs have occupied a vital position along the ages. They have constituted a visual, physical and psychological means to distinguish between different religions and different religious sects. The symbol object, picture, sign, word and gesture require the association of certain conscious ideas to express what is meant by them. In this sense, the Islamic faith constitutes no exception. In a culture in which religion is an identity signifier, dress, salutations, names, nicknames, places, gestures and family lines have brought together millions of believers who seem to share some common rituals representing a specific attitude toward the universe. But at the same time, such signs have been in many cases exclusive, dividing and sometimes deceiving and problematic. Undoubtedly, there should be some aspects of unity in the Islamic case when it comes to signs and representations. There should be as well some manifestations of division, exclusion and pragmatism in the usage of these signs. In fact, the Islamic religious signs and their representations can be simultaneously unifying and dividing. We assume that the persistence of the unifying and dividing aspects is a logical continuation of the original confrontation between hard-line believers and their liberal and moderate co-religionists.

Recent publications about Islamic religions signs are profuse. In 1999 Abdelkader Tayob examined Islamic signs and symbols and their relation with Islamic values (Tayob,1999). In 2003 Malcolm Clark worked on the origins, practices and beliefs of Islam, including Islamic symbolism (Clark, 2003). In 2006 Edward E. Curtis studied Arab Muslim symbolism and its use in the movements of Arab nationalism (Curtis, 2006). In the electronic “Religion Library”, Islamic symbolism was studied in comparison with other religious traditions (religion Library). In 2003 Tanja Al-Hariri-Wendel analysed the diversity of religious signs in the Islamic faith. (Wendel, 2003). In 2012 Kurt Montz Arthur Goldammer made a comparative study on religious signs and showed how these symbols maintain and strengthen the relationship between human beings and the realm of the sacred. (Goldammer) Yet little has been done on the unification and division aspects in relation to the current world circumstances.

This work consists of three parts. The first part analyses the unification and division aspects of a sample of Islamic religious signs. The second part examines the relevance of some internal and external dynamics to the issue of these signs in the current world situation. The third and final part sheds light on the possibility of applying some

theories of Arab and western humanists to a peaceful use of religious signs in a globally-waged cultural confrontation between North and South.

Methodologically, a selection of some Qu'ranic texts and a sample of some Arab and western newspaper headlines constitute the corpus of this paper to which theories of some thinkers of cultural materialism are applied to the case of Muslims in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" according to which some communities are built on spurious tenets for the sake of homogenization and normalization at the expense of more vital ethical issues are at the core of this work. Reference is made to Louis Althusser's theory of "interpellation" showing how the stoked features of an identity can resurface whenever the same conditions resurface. Frantz Fanon's theory about the role of language will be useful in revealing how speaking a language entails adopting the civilisation of that language. The analysis relies on Pierre Bourdieu's "production theory" which situates artistic works and educational provision within the social conditions of their production, circulation and consumption. We have, as well, made use of Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge according to which knowledge is perceived as a form of power allowing its possessor to consider himself as the source of discipline and the executor of punishment.

At the same time, the extent to which the ideas of such Arab and western humanists as Ahmed Ibn Miskawayh, Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas will be applied to test its applicability to the issue of signs and representation in the Muslims' case. Ibn Miskawayh deals with the role of reason in the cultivation of a moral health. Ricoeur's perception of the relationship between the "civilized self" and the "civilized other" and Levinas' notion of the "face-to-face encounter" in the relationship between the "I" and the "other" may be one way for a peaceful coexistence in different parts of the globe.

2-UNIFYING AND DIVIDING ASPECTS OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SIGNS

In the Islamic world, religious signs have not only fostered disciplinary daily rituals in the lives of believers but have also enhanced a sense of belonging to a bigger nation. Arabic, the language of the Qur'an is spoken by no less than 250 million people around the globe. It says in the Holy Book "Surely we have revealed it an Arabic Qu'ran that you may understand." (Shakir, 1999, p.224) Speaking the same language usually entails a possibility for unity, solidarity and cooperation. In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the spread and Origin of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson states that "much the most important thing about language is the capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect particular solidarities." (Anderson, 1983, p.133) Muslims' agreement on the source of the Qu'ran as being God's words seems to reinforce the role of Arabic in building strong ties among believers. (Khawaja)

The significant role of Arabic in the unification of large sections of the Islamic world cannot hide the short coming of this language among Muslims themselves. In fact, the sacredness of Arabic as the language of the holy Qu'ran has not been able to resist the widespread use and popularity of English, particularly regarding scientific and technological advancements. If we know that up to the opening decades of the twenty-first century, the global figure for the number of those who use English may reach 800 million speakers and that 96 per cent of the world's scientific technological researches, discoveries and achievements are presented and circulated in English, (Crystal, 1988, p14) we discover the wide rift between the weight of this language and the ongoing attempts of many Islamic countries to revive the use of their Arabic and Arabize their educational syllabus.

In the meantime, there has been a growing tendency within the Arab Muslim world itself to reinforce the use of English as being the language of an economically globalized world. Undoubtedly, advances in communication technologies after the invention of the Internet has eased the movement of products and has forced many Arab Muslim countries to adapt to new economic circumstances through the use of English in a competitive globalized economics. The establishment of the World Trade Organisation eliminated the tariff barriers and opened free markets, which have necessitated a proficient use of English in order to appeal to larger masses of consumers and guarantee a broader circulation of goods. In this sense, Frantz Fanon's theory about the role of language in the assimilation of citizens falls in line with what English has done in the adaptation of people to the western lifestyle. He says: "To speak means to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture, and the weight of civilisation." (Fanon, 1952, pp1-2-21)

A main characteristic of Islamic dress is its double function of being esoteric and exoteric, that is veiling and revealing. Dress and clothing styles of Muslim believers have contributed to the feeling of unity and togetherness. In fact, the Kamis, the veil and the hat have in many cases strengthened a widespread yearning among Muslims for a unique clothing style which prescribes how Muslims, men and women, are expected to dress themselves. For

instance, looseness and thickness of the dress, as well as the extent of body covering are fundamental requirements for Muslims. It says in the holy book "O children of Adam! We have indeed sent down to you clothing to cover your shame and (clothing) for beauty and clothing that guards (against evil), that is the best-that is of the communication of Allah that they may be mindful. (Shakir, 1999, p.136) In his definition of the religious community, Anderson perceives that "the visual representations of the sacred communities, dress.... costume [were] essential in the structuring of the [religious] imagined community. (Anderson, 1983, p.23)

It is true that clothes have been a unifying sign for Muslims. They have allowed them to be unique while being in Mecca for pilgrimage or while covering their whole bodies when praying. Nevertheless, the civilian context for many Islamic countries tends to be different from their religious one. Though looseness, thickness and body covering are recommended in the Islamic dress code, the civilian constitutions of many Islamic countries acknowledge the separation between state and religion, and hence guarantee the freedom of dress. For instance, the first section of the recently made Tunisian constitution restricts the wearing of sectarian dress, such as the hijab or the kamis, men's knee-length shirt, in government offices or at certain public gatherings. (Tunisia's Constitution of 2014, 2014, p.4) The outcome is a western-oriented dress among large sections of liberal Islamic populations, which does not fit strict interpretation to the Islamic dress code.

The burka in itself has veiled different types of tricks, deceptions and confusions. Apart from being sometimes a cultural practice rather than a religious sign, it has been the source of opposed interpretations among Muslim believers. The outcome of the two following Qu'ranic verses " And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head coverings on their bosoms, and not to display their bosoms except to their husbands..." (Shakir, 1999, p.338) and " O! Prophet say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments, this will be more proper, that they will be known, and thus they will not be given trouble, and Allah is forgiving and merciful " (*Ibid*, p.414) is a wide rift between moderates who emphasize the practical role of the burka as mainly hiding women's beauty and only concerning the daughters and women of the prophet Mohamed, and the fundamentalists who consider such practice an urgent obligation on every Muslim woman. Nadia Takolia, a Muslim feminist actress declares that "as a Muslim woman, I see the veil as a rejection of progressive values." (Takolia, 2012)

Space, in the context of Muslim believers has constituted another sign in the unity of Muslims. Pilgrimage to the holy lands of Mecca and Medina has attracted millions of Muslims to the same place. It says in the Qu'ran "And proclaim among men the pilgrimage: they will come to you on foot on every lean camel, coming from every remote path." (Shakir, 1999, p.318). Likewise, Anderson maintains that "The reality of the imagined religious community depended profoundly on countless, ceaseless travels of faithful seekers." (Anderson, 1983, p.54) If Mecca and Medina remind Muslims of the birth place of Mohamed, his struggle and his deeds, Jerusalem, the contested region between Muslims and Jews has united Muslims in their efforts to liberate the place and have access to its holy mosque. In his book, *Historical Geography*, Stephen Legg reveals how visiting sites, remembering certain events and refusing to forget them becomes a deliberate strategy in struggles for liberation. He sees that "Sites of counter-memory mark times and places in which people have refused to forget. They can rebut the memory schemes of a dominant clan, caste, or nation, providing an alternative form of remembering and identity." (Legg, 2005, p.181)

Mecca was truly the centre of the world in the high days of the Islamic nation. It was the birth place of Mohammed, the place of his revelation and the trade market of world products. However, nowadays many progressive Muslims tend to believe that, apart from being a yearly meeting place for religious rituals, Mecca cannot sustain its former position. According them, New York is the centre of civilization, modernity, fashion and economic activities. In fact, they perceive that the United States and its growing middle classes tend to have a global impact on the cultural tastes of the whole world whether in arts, diets, clothing or lifestyles. Even more important, the political, cultural and economic future of Mecca and the whole region has become under the "mercy" of the United States and other allies, in front of a creeping sectarian conflict threatening the unity and lives of Muslims particularly in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. (Valelly, 2014, p.12)

Time is another pillar in the unity of Muslims. Praying Five times a day, for instance, tends to play a unifying role in the religious imagined communities of Muslim believers. It says in the holy book "Keep up prayer, surely prayer is a timed ordinance for the believers." (Shakir, 1999, p.181) It is what Anderson calls "homogenous, empty time" in which simultaneity is marked by temporal coincidence and measured by clock and calendar." (Anderson, 1983, p.24) In this sense, sacrifices, celebrations and pilgrimage, usually take place at the same time to gather Muslims under the same commitment no matter how far they may be from one another. "In 622 A.D, Muhammad and his

loyal follower Abu Baker, who was chosen as the Caliph after the death of the prophet, set out to the Medina, 13 years after staying in Mecca. Ali (who later became the Caliph suggested the Hijiri as the beginning of the Islamic year with Moharram as its first month. Consequently, Caliph Omar in 21 A.H or 641 A.D introduced the Islamic calendar in its present form.” (Al-Sallami)

The unifying aspect of time through Islamic daily rituals, or yearly religious obligations has not been able to play down some different conceptions about time itself within the Islamic world. A wide gap has come to surface between westernized Muslims who consider the western calendar as transmitting an up-to-date future oriented attitude toward the universe, and those who are closely connected, at least at the level of their thoughts and conceptions towards the Hijri calendar. In fact, large sections among the Muslim communities tend to possess a yearning for the high days of the prophet Muhammed and his companions, an interest in the celebration of their immigration from Mecca to the Medina and hence a preference to refer to the Hijiri months of the year, particularly when they start counting down the number of Hijiri months left before Ramadan. The outcome is a confrontation between Muslim modernisers who opt for an adaptation to a globalized modern world and Muslim fundamentalists who favour the implementation of the sacred text in contemporary times. (Ramadan, 2010)

The crescent is another sign that Arab Muslims refer to when they fast the holy month, Ramadan, and celebrate Aid El- Fitr. Throughout the Arab Muslim world, the religious obligation to fast for one month from sunrise to sunset is closely connected to the appearance of the crescent, signalling the beginning of such an obligation, and its reappearance to declare its end. According to the Quran, “The month of Ramadhan is that in which the Qu’ran was revealed, guidance to men and clear proofs of the guidance and the distinction, thereof whoever of you is present in the month, he shall fast therein.” (Shakir, 1999, p.25) In spite of the fact that this astrologic sign appears in different parts of the world, it is only the Arab Muslims who associate such a phenomenon with sacredness repentance and rightfulness. A religious imagined community is united in its explanation to and implementation of this sign no matter how far individuals may be from one another.

The unifying manifestation of the crescent in the holy month and in the celebration of Aid El-fitr does not cancel some exceptions of disbelief and disregard among the Islamic communities in different countries. The freedom of belief in many Islamic secular systems has allowed some Muslims to consider the crescent as being no more than an astrologic issue. In this sense, through different ways and means some cafes and restaurant’s owners have managed to evade some lenient regulations and opened their businesses in Ramadan. There have been numerous cases of tension and conflicts between conservative Muslims and their secularist countrymen. In addition, fasting and closure of cafes and restaurants have been a controversial issue in many Arab Muslim countries. (Smathi, 2013)

Mohammad himself is an icon for the concept of a unified Muslim nation. For a big majority of Muslims, he is a super kind of human beings as he makes part of the divine. The belief that he is the last messenger sent to the whole humanity has given him a valuable sacred position. It is stated in the Holy Book “O prophet! Surely, we have sent you as a witness, and as a bearer of good news and as a warner. And as one inviting as a light giving torch.” (Shakir, 1999, p.411) Besides, a collection of Mohammad’s sayings and deeds, also known as Sunnah or ahadith constitute a main pillar in the daily rituals of many Muslims who favour a strict implementation of these in different aspects of their lives. (Siddiqui)

Nevertheless, Mohammad’s blood line has been used to legitimize political power and position. Many politicians seem to find, in the construction of blood lines with Prophet Mohamed, a way to convince the masses about the legacy of their rule. In her book *King Abdullah, Britain and the Making of Jordan*, Mary Wilson, a British writer, shows how the British forged the Jewish family name “Jadoun” to become the Hechimite dynasty. Such a story clarifies the idea that the issue of blood connection with the Prophet is a political investment to convince the masses that their rulers are a “political destiny” and being obedient to them is a sacred obligation. (Wilson, 1987, p.37) It is a postmodern rebirth of the European middle ages’ concept of “Divine Rights” of kings which has normally faded away with the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment and the role of reason.

The Islamic Black Banner may be considered as another sign of Muslims unification. It is an idea which goes back to the eighth century. The white Arabic phrases written at the top in the first half of an Islamic phrase called the *shaheda*, or declaration of faith. Another symbol on the flag is the white circle at its centre, which contains the second part of the *Shaheda* : “Mohammad is the messenger of God.” The two Arabic phrases and the ancient-looking font of the Arabic work evoke an image of the historical Islamic Caliphate. It is an image that conservative Muslims in different parts of the globe tend to be eager to see and live in our times. (Porzucki, 2014)

In the same vein, religious signs in the context of the Islamic faith have been threatening the national unity of many Arab countries. Imagining themselves as belonging to a larger religious imagined community, many religious fundamentalists use the black flag to express their connection in space and time with a broader Muslim community, and their disconnection from the national flag, hence with national issues. Accordingly, cultural confrontations between fundamentalist and secularists have been menacing the safety, security and unity of many Arab Muslim societies, particularly after what came to be known as the 2011 “ Arab Spring.” Such newspaper headlines as , “Tunisia’s Islamists and Fundamentalist: A Growing Divide” (Chourabi) , “Islamist Party in Tunisia Concedes to Secularists” (Gall, 2014), “Arab Spring had Spread Fundamentalism Not Secularism” (Jansen, 2012), “Those Who Support Democracy Must Welcome the Rise of Political Islam” (Khanfar, 2011), “The Paradoxes of the Re-Islamization of Muslim Societies” (Oliver, 2011), and “Was the Arab Spring a Victory for Extremism?” (Goldberg, 2011) have shown that the question of cultural coexistence has become a hot issue in the region

The sacred text in itself has been a unifying sign for Muslims. In fact, in the context of the Muslim faith, religious discourse can be regarded as a form of power. Many Muslims’ belief in the ability of Qu’ran to provide them with the appropriate answers to contemporary issues and problems has been as source of power for these people. It is stated in the Holy Book. “We have not neglected anything in the book, then to their lord shall they be gathered” (Shakir, 1999, p.118) Accordingly, memorizing the whole Qu’ran has nurtured the belief among many Muslims about the possibility of reforming and controlling the world according to the teachings of the text. In his analysis to the close connection between power and knowledge, Michel Foucault, a contemporary French thinker, maintains that knowledge is always a form of power and he takes it a step further to perceive that knowledge can be gained from power. He says “All knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others entails constraints, regulations and the disciplining of practice.” (Foucault, 1977, p.27)

Consequently, the issue of signs in the Islamic context has also engendered two opposed views toward the role of schools and schooling. Paralleling the official educational systems of many Arab countries, there has been a growing number of Qu’ranic schools. It is the reaction of the pro-Islamic machine against what is considered as westernized postcolonial systems. It is what Pierre Bourdieu’s “production theory” calls “the field of cultural production.” He thinks that “The field of cultural production is the area par excellence of clashes between the dominant class...and the dominated fractions who are totally involved in the struggle. This conflict brings about particular markets in which the different fractions of the dominant class can find products adjusted to their tastes, whether in the theatre, in painting, fashion, or decoration.” (Bourdieu, 1993, p.102)

3-INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DYNAMICS

The persistence of the dichotomy of the unification and division aspects within the Islamic religious signs and their representations cannot be solely attributed to that original co-existence of hard-line believers and their liberal and moderate co-religionists. In this respect the economic dimension needs to be considered. It seems that the scale of poverty and unemployment in the Arab Muslim communities have led many young Muslims to fall back on their religion using different signs to express a sense of marginalisation and alienation. In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, the World Bank has estimated that unemployment is running at 11.5 per cent around the Arab region. That is far higher than most other parts of the world. Globally, unemployment is running at 5.9 per cent (Dudley, 2014). In the same period it was disclosed that half of global poverty reside in the Muslim world population while the Muslim world population is 24 per cent of the total global population (*Ibid*). It is a situation which evokes Louis Althusser’s “theory of interpellation” He gives the example of “a policeman shouting someone’s name in the street, and that person’s recognition that such a salutation was himself.” (Althusser, 1970, p.82) It is the process through which one recognizes himself as belonging to a particular group when the stocked features of that identity are interpellated. Conditioning citizens to accept their lot and behave in a certain way may be applied to a situation when an insular attitude is met with another narrow-minded consensus, resulting in a pro-action as a negative response at the expense of some vital issues.

Following privatisation processes and adhering to the requirements of global economics, particularly competition and free enterprise, many small uncompetitive businesses could not cope with the new global market regulations. This situation ended up with the dismissal of many workers and the subsequent poverty of many Arab Muslim families. The new economic environment and its effects does not only concern Arab Muslims, European Muslim immigrants seem to have paid the price of global economics too. Emphasizing the culture of hard work, individualism self-reliance, self responsibility, laissez-faire, productivity and law and order have resulted in the formation of a European underclass most of which is composed of Muslim European citizens (Ghoil, 2016).

The resort of many marginalised young Muslims in parts of the world to the use of religious signs and their representations has been able to produce a category of Muslim citizens with the potential of being victimizers. Starting from the beginning of the twenty-first century an unprecedented series of attacks throughout the world have been mostly attributed to lower class citizens whose feeling of despair and helplessness has led them to commit suicide bombing, to plot mass killing and to organize sudden assaults, murdering innocent civilians, damaging countries infrastructure and putting whole communities under pressure. Not surprisingly, the globally televised scenes, images and reports of the 9/11 attack in the US, the 2004 Madrid bombing, the 2005 London blasts, the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the 2015 Bardo Museum assault, the 2017 Brussels scenes, with the ongoing civil wars in the Middle East have all been presented as touching upon global safety and security, and ended with the excluding Islamophobic attitudes. (WS Graphic News, 2015).

Advances in communications technologies have their own part to play in the propagation of the position of some religious signs and their representations in the Islamic case. The instantaneous diffusion of scenes of violence in some religious spaces may engender a feeling of sympathy and humiliation when some Islamic religious sites or mosques are violated. The televised violent scenes in Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs, particularly after the recent decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018 (Ferrill, 2018) could electronically mobilise a big number of sympathisers. In the same way the publication of the Danish cartoons engendered a wholesale rage among conservative Muslims and led to uncontrolled criminal reactions. (Staff, 2015). The counter-reaction was a western media backlash against Muslims and Islam. It is a situation which falls in line with Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model" theory according to which some capitalist systems choose among its elite those who can best represent their interests. He says

The "propaganda model" actually has a fair amount of elite advocacy. In fact, there is a very significant tradition among elite democratic thinkers in the West which claims that the media and the intellectual class in general *ought to* carry out a propaganda function, they are supposed to marginalize the general population by controlling what is called 'the public mind'. This view has probably been the dominant theme in Anglo-American thought over three hundred years. (Chomsky, 2012, p.15-16)

Taking Britain as an example can reveal the role of media coverage in influencing the Public. Such suspicion-filled headlines as "UK Newspapers Express Outrage While Calling for Action over Paris Attacks" (Greensdale) , "Britain Unveils Plans to Fight Extremism in Young Muslims" (Castle, 2015), "Cameron's Government and British Muslims: a Difficult Relationship", (Weaver, 2016) "Cameron's Anti-terror Plans Alienate Muslims", (Newsroom, 2015) "Political Correctness Is the Incubator of Islamism" (Imani, 2005), "Great Britain-Worth-Saving?" (Pipes, 2005), "Quarter of British Muslims Sympathise with *Charlie Hebdo* Terrorists" (Holehouse, 2015), and "This Country is Pro-Muslim. It Is Giving Succour to the Extremists Who Would Destroy Us." (Philips, 2018) British Muslims have become an easy target for Islamophobic attitudes, verbal abuse and physical violence.

The comparatively young age profile of the Muslim populations tends to be another dynamic in the workings of the religious symbols and their representations. Whether within Arab Muslim countries or within European Muslim communities, Muslim citizens constitute a young average age compared with other mainstream or ethnic religions. A selection of some newspaper headlines on the globally rising number of young Muslims may argue for the subsequent fear and suspicion of many others. "Muslims Have the Largest Share of Young, but also Die Early" (Varne, 2016), "Future Features Young Muslims and Old Buddhists" (Kvittingen, 2017) , "Muslim Population Highest in Youth Category: census" (Deccan Chronicle, 2016), "How the Young Muslim Generation Is Changing the World:" (Rahmiasri, 2016) and "Do Muslims Have More Children than Other Women in Western Europe?" (Kent, 2018) must have alerted not only mainstream politics, but also populist attitudes. In a recent culture war between North and South, young hard-line European Muslims have electronically come face to face with the excluding ultra-right groups and political parties. The prospects of the situation seem to aggravate as many far-right political parties have recently moved to European mainstream politics, particularly in Scandinavian countries. (Tartar, 2017).

The Muslim share of the population throughout Europe grew about 1 percentage point a decade, from 4 percent in 1990 to 6 percent in 2010. This pattern is expected to continue through 2030, when Muslims are projected to make up 8 percent of Europe's population. In addition, Muslims are younger than other Europeans. In 2010, the average age of Muslims throughout Europe was 32, eight years younger than the median for all Europeans. A selection of some western newspaper headlines on the issue of the growing number of European Muslims compared with the European mainstream population can justify the growing fears among European societies. Headlines as "Number of

Muslim Children in Britain Doubles in a Decade” (Bingham, 2015). “What Is It Like to Be Young and Muslim in Europe?” (Cornish, 2015), “Meet Generation M: Affluent Muslims Changing the World” (Sherwood, 2016), “The Growing Muslim Population in Europe” (Roberts, 2008), “Europe’s Muslim Population in Some EU Countries Could Triple, Says Report” (Sherwood, 2016), “European Muslims Will Be Instrumental in Saving the Continent’s Ageing Population” (Sannad, 2017), “Muslims Tell Europe: One Day All Will Be Ours” (Meotti, 2017), and “Europe’s Growing Muslim Population” (Pews Research Center, 2017) may incite both the European public and politicians to take more ‘prevention’ measures before it is too late.

4-WHERE NOW?

Arab humanism may be one way of limiting the risks and dangers of blind adherence to religious or secular signs in the present world situation. In his *Tahdhib Al-Akhlak (The Cultivation of Morals)*. Ahmed Ibn Miskawayh sees that in order to eradicate fault and improve social relationships among citizens, the cultivation of moral health as being similar to the cultivation of physical health is essentially in the preservation of moral equilibrium. In this respect, the role of reason seems to be crucial. The capacity of the human mind and heart to use reason to investigate the ultimate causes of faults and seek to replace these with helpful alternatives can save humanity from being at the mercy of feelings and the varying influences that come from the outside. Ibn Miskawayh perceives that when human beings develop and improve their ability to apply reason to their lives, they can increase their virtues and eliminate their vices. (Ibn Maskaawayh, 1996, p21)

Western humanism can as well lessen the effects of the present culture war between east and west over the significance of religious symbols and their representations. Paul Ricoeur's perception of the relationship between the self and the other may be relevant to the case of signs in the Arab Muslim context in his *History and Truth*, Ricoeur deals with the problem of "the self" and "the other", "identity" and "otherness", or more generally, the "man-to-man" relationship. He sees that this relationship is problematic in that it refers to that old philosophic issue, that of "identity and multiplicity". This issue presumes that multiplicity is one of the basic signs showing "contradiction" while "identity" represents simplicity and clarity. According to him, it is possible to think of the relationship between "the self" and "the other" while avoiding two classical perceptions. The first one is based on the epistemology of the relationship between the "self" and the "subject." In relation to the "self", the "other" is a mere subject". This objectification deprives the others of his subjectivity, and forces the "self" into an authoritarian relationship with the "other". The second one is based on the dialectical attitude founded by Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel which sees the relationship between the "self" and the "other" as being based on "exchanging negation". The "self" can be aware of itself only when it negates the "other". In the meantime, the "other" can make of the "self" an "other" to exercise a similar negation. (Ricoeur, 1995, p.258)

In reaction to this conflictual relationship between the "self" and the "other", Ricoeur proposes a relationship of "exchanging confession". The two parts of the relationship are the "civilized self" and the "civilized other". This relationship is not necessarily an objectification or an authoritarian one. It is a relationship of an "exchange of experiences" Ricoeur perceives that the history of mankind is a history of "multiplicity and variety", a variety and multiplicity of language, signs are in themselves a type of language, and cultures. This multiplicity is not an excuse for struggle and confrontation in the way that every language and culture use its uniqueness to negate the other. Ricoeur gives variety and difference a positive role. He sees that these are signs of riches and fertility and an incentive to progress and renovation. He sums up this relationship as follows: "to be the other at a time I remain myself." Ricoeur stresses that "otherness" cannot necessarily negate identity, and that identity preservation does not negate the "other" because the movement from the "self" to the "other" is always a movement from man to man. (*Ibid*, p.258)

According to Ricoeur, the relationship between the "civilized self" and the "civilized other" takes place in a "civilized context". He emphasizes that "an effective creative culture does not fear meeting with other cultures because that meeting can be embarrassing only to the cultures which are no longer capable of renewal, modernization, discovery and creativity". (*Ibid*, p.260)

In the context of signs and representations, both Islamists and secularists need to be engaged in a relationship of "exchanging confession". Rather than being based on objectification, authoritarianism, or exchanging negation, relationships would depend on mutual respect and understanding. Multiplicity and variety do not need to be an excuse for fear, marginalization and narrow-mindedness, entailing a confrontation between two prejudices. Difference and variety through signs within the same society or at a global level need to have a positive role, instead of being perceived as a source of suspicion for one group and an excuse for encapsulation for another.

Emmanuel Levinas' vision of relationship between the "I" and the "other" may also be applicable to the issue of signs in the Arab Muslim context. At the core of Levinas' thought is the description of the "face –to –face" encounter with another person. That encounter evinces a particular feature. The "other" impacts the "I" unlike any worldly object or force. The "I" can communicate with and constitute the other person cognitively on the basis of vision, as an alter ego, that is another self or a very intimate friend. Levinas says: "I can see that another human being is like me, acts like me ,appears to the master of his conscious life ...the other person addresses me , calls to me, he does not even have utter words in order for me to feel the summons implicit in his approach." (Levinas, 2003, p.162)

If the role of signs is to be perceived in the light of Levinas' vision of humanity, "intersubjectivity", or what he calls "live immediacy", members of different religions or different religious sects may learn to transcend religious and cultural differences. It is a situation in which the citizens may need to cognitively possess the ability to respond to one another and to get involved in a dialogue for the benefit of intercultural living. Instead of treating the other as being part of a group with all the negative stereotypes that may emerge through signs, citizens could benefit from a "face-to-face encounter". A "live immediacy" would enable people to treat one another as individuals rather than as representatives of a whole group, that would drive them to transcend their ready-made attitudes toward the other and their religious and cultural differences wherever and whenever they meet each and learn to co-exist as civilized selves and other.

5-FINDINGS

First, assuming that the persistence of the unification and the division aspects of the Islamic religious signs is a logical product of the original confrontation between hard-line believers and their liberal co-religionists cannot in itself account for the current encounter between the two opposed attitudes. It seems that the socio-economic status of many Muslim citizens within Islamic countries and among European societies can be a crucial determinant of the reaction of these people toward these signs and their representations: the less affluent Muslim citizens are the more they are liable to fall back on their religious symbols, expressing a sense of marginalisation and dissatisfaction.

Second, attention should be given to the degree of importance regarding Islamic religious signs and their representations. A wide rift can be seen between signs of daily rituals such as language, prayer times and clothing style; and the highly ranked symbols of space (Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem), personalities (Mohamed and his Companions) and texts (the holy Qu'ran and hadith): the more these latter are involved in the current culture war between North and South the more extremis some Muslim citizens grow.

Third, advances in communications technologies seem to have heightened the use of these religious signs in the present culture war. The instantaneous diffusion of scenes of violence involving the Muslim communities throughout the world has nurtured among a category of Muslims a feeling of humiliation and powerlessness and a firm attachment to their religious signs. The outcome is a growing sense of belonging to the wider Muslim world rather than to the immediate local Muslim one, which engenders a virtual collective dream of world dominance in spite of the hindrances of space and frontiers.

Fourth, online newspaper headlines have contributed to fuelling the current culture war through the issue of religious signs. The recurrence of such phrases and lexical items as "growing divide" "voting secular", "concedes to secularists", "extremists", "extremism", "terrorists", "destroy", "spread fundamentalism", "rise of political Islam", "re-Islamization of Muslim societies", and "victory for extremism" can further incite both believers and their more liberal and moderate countrymen within Arab Muslim countries or among western societies to use different religious signs as a vehicle for their beliefs and attitudes: the Islamic black banner and the Jewish star of David connote a reciprocal negation.

Fifth, an inclusion/exclusion paradigm tends to be another dynamic in the persistence of the issue of Islamic signs and their representations. Salutation ways, clothing styles and facial appearances can be judgemental. In this respect, these signs may easily allow the possibility to categorize fellow citizens and decide upon their acceptance or non-acceptance as friends, partners or colleagues.

Sixth, the comparatively young age profile of Muslim citizens constitutes a main pillar in the longevity of the controversy over Islamic religious signs and their representations. Whether within Muslim countries or among European societies, Muslim citizens are far more younger than an ageing Christian or Jewish populations. Through a sample of electronic newspaper headlines, the recurrence of such phrases and lexical items as "young", "[Europe]will be ours", "[Muslims] changing the world", "young and Muslim", "[number] doubles", "[number] could triple", "[young Muslims] will be instrumental", "largest share of young [Muslims]", "young Muslim

generation” , “more [Muslims] children” , and “highest in youth category” describing the future prospects of Muslim populations can intensify the use of reciprocal religious signs in opposite directions to electronically attract as many adherents as possible in the near future.

Seventh, a combination of a morally cultivated health in a civilised self and a reciprocal morally cultivated health in a civilised other may possibly eliminate the risks and dangers of hatred selfishness and ,stereotypical attitudes.

6-CONCLUSION

Through a selection of some Qu'ranic texts and a sample of newspaper articles, we have seen the extent to which the assumption that the persistence of the unification and division aspects of the Islamic religious signs and their representations is the product of the original confrontation between hard-line believers and their liberal or moderate co-religionists be validated. In fact, we have shown how such signs as language, space, time, dress and religious rituals may build up a respectable degree of unity and solidarities through “imagined communities”. At the same time, we have revealed the possibility of division these signs may endanger, particularly when it comes to liberal, progressive Muslims in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it seems that some other internal and external dynamics need to be considered. The low socio-economic status of a locally and globally growing young Muslim generation and the recent widely diffused local and global confrontation between fundamentalists and secularists through advances in communications technologies have highlighted the position of some of these signs, taking the issue out from its local arena to a global one. In a subsequent global encounter between religious fundamentalists and ultra-right groups and populist political parties, religious and secular signs may be the means in an inclusion\exclusion game to attract as many supporters as possible in an electronic culture war. A mutual belief in the role of reason in cultivating moral health, establishing a new relationship between a “civilised self” and a “civilised other” may ease intercultural coexistence and lessen the impact of stereotypical attitudes among both sides.

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