



**MA thesis**  
**Religious Studies**

**Bayt al-Hikmah – House of Wisdom**

The future of Islam and Muslims in Iceland  
Identity Construction and Solidarity through Interculturalism,  
Communicative Dialogue and Mutual Understanding

Halldór Nikulás Lár

**Supervisor Magnús Þorkell Bernharðsson**  
**June 2021**



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**University of Iceland**

**School of Humanities**

**Religious Studies**

# **Bayt al-Hikmah – House of Wisdom**

*The future of Islam and Muslims in Iceland  
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## Útdráttur

Þjóðerniseinangrun múslima er vaxandi vandamál í Evrópu, þar sem tilhneigingin er að skilgreina alla múslima saman í einn einsleitán hóp. Þessi rannsókn sýnir fram á að túlkun Jihadista á íslam, með þeim alvarlegu afleiðingum sem henni fylgja, er meginástæða þessarar félagslegu afmörkunar múslima. Í því er vandamálið fólgið, ekki í íslam sem trú, heldur í ákveðinni túlkun á henni og viðbrögðum við þeirri túlkun. Allt bendir til þess að túlkun öfgahópa íslam sé langt frá því að vera nákvæm framsetning á trúnni. Vandamálin í samskiptum meginlands Evrópu og múslima eiga ekki við um Ísland, en þessi breyting í átt að aðskilnaði ætti að vera lærdómur fyrir landið. Rannsóknargögnin staðfesta að þetta þarf ekki að vera vandamál. Erfið aðlögun múslima í Evrópu stafar fyrst og fremst af a) félagslegri afmörkun múslima sem byggir á mótun ákveðinnar staðalímyndar, b) skilningsleysi og vanhæfni fjölmenningsstefnunnar (e. *multiculturalism*) til að takast á við andlega menningu múslima og löngun þeirra til trúarlegs lífs í veraldlegu samfélagi. Því horfir Evrópa nú til sammenningsstefnunnar (þýðing höfundar á enska orðinu *interculturalism*) eftir aðstoð.

Til að koma í veg fyrir, eða draga úr líkum þess að sá núningur sem nú einkennir samskipti Evrópu við múslima nái inn í íslenskan veruleika, er tvennt sem skiptir afgerandi máli: 1) Skilningur á íslam sem trú og núverandi hugmyndafræðilegum siðaskiptum sem eiga sér stað innan samfélags múslima. Kóraninn og íslam eru ekki vandamálið í Vestrænum samfélögum. Íslam sem trú hefur enga and-félagslega, and-fjölmenningslega, and-mannréttindalega, eða and-Vestræna innbyggða þætti, slíkar fullyrðingar er að finna í huga túlkandans, þar sem túlkunin er tekin úr sögulegu og samfélagslegu samhengi. 2) Ísland þarf að setja ákvæði um sammenningsstefnu (e. *interculturalism*) í innflytjendastefnu sína. Dýpkun ýmissa þátta fjölbreytileikans á Íslandi kallar eftir endurmati á núverandi stefnu um fjölbreytileikastjórnun (e. *diversity management*), til að halda enn betur utan um þjóðlega *samstöðu, einingu og skynjun þess að tilheyra*. Í fræðum stjórnmálaheimspekinnar eru slíkir þættir taldir skipta miklu máli fyrir menningarflæði fjölbreytilegs samfélags.

## Abstract

The ‘othering’ of Muslims is a growing problem in Europe, as an ethnic construct is now placing all Muslims in one homogeneous group of people. This study shows that the Jihadist interpretation of Islam, with its consequential actions, is the main reason for this social demarcation of Muslims. Therein lies the problem, not in Islam itself as a religion, but a particular type of interpretation and reaction. Everything points to the fact that this extremist interpretation is far from being an accurate representation of Islam. The problems in the European-Muslim relationship are not true for Iceland, but this gradual change should be a lesson to learn from. The empirical data confirms that this does not have to be a problem. Problematic Muslim integration into Europe is due to a) a stereotypical demarcation of Muslims, b) the lack of understanding and the inability of multiculturalism to cope with Muslim spirituality and desire for religious life in a secularistic society. Thus, Europe is now looking to interculturalism for help.

Two things are imperative to prevent or diminish the likelihood of this European-Muslim friction entering Icelandic reality: 1) An understanding of Islam as a religion and the current ideological reformation within the Muslim ummah. The Qur’an and Islam are not the problems in Western societies. Islam as a religion has no inherent anti-social, anti-pluralistic, anti-human rights, or anti-Western elements built into it, and any such claim is to be found in the mind of the interpreter, as taken out of both historical and societal context. 2) Iceland needs to make certain provisions in its integration policies by including interculturalism. The deepening of various diversity in Iceland calls for a reevaluation of the existing diversity management policy to better facilitate *solidarity and a sense of belonging*. Such elements are considered in political philosophy to be imperative for the cultural meetings of diverse groups.

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# 1 Introduction

*“I have to admit that I don’t think Iceland is particularly nice. I’m bored by the weather here ... I don’t think Esjan is anything special ... I think this land has tried to kill us slowly ... If Iceland is a mother, she is an unpredictable drunken bitch ... We love her as she is. Unconditionally. For though she may not be the best mother in the world, she is our mother.”*

Jón Gnarr<sup>1</sup>

*“The morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a critical moment in Icelanders’ fight for freedom. There was no time to lose, and work needed to be done in preparation for the restoration of the ancient Icelandic Commonwealth, which had created the first Icelandic golden age.”*

Jónas frá Hriflu<sup>2</sup>

Icelanders’ collective memory, all aspects of their social and cultural environmental systems, have shaped them and their identity through time. These many and varied variables accumulate in their habitus as they participate, store in memory, utilize and recreate their identity.<sup>3</sup> It can thus be said that their habitus is the accumulation of cognitive knowledge that has formed in their space throughout history, their collective memory. This concurs with what Emile Durkheim<sup>4</sup> says about culture: its roots are to be found in the social network and the collective consciousness of society.

This being the case, one can ask if the former Reykjavik mayor, Mr. Jón Gnarr, and the former parliament member, Mr. Jónas frá Hriflu, refer to the same country in their quotes above. It seems like their habitus, their accumulated knowledge, and collective memory stem from totally different roots. It only shows that Iceland is not just one thing, but like beauty is, in the eye of the beholder. However, nationalist history and the official collective memories try to standardize such memorization and assume homogeneity where there is diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Jón Gnarr, “Er Ísland gott?”, *Fréttablaðið*, *Visir.is* 10. October 2015, retrieved 12. June 2020, from <https://www.visir.is/g/20151513105d>.

<sup>2</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “Þjóðerni og karlmennska á Íslandi við upphaf 20. Aldar”, *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?*, editors Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Rabinow, “Representations are social facts: Modernity and post-modernity in anthropology”, *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, editors James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pg. 252.

<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*, New York: The Free Press, pg. 444-446.

Jónas frá Hríflu refers to the great importance of uniting Icelanders as they sought to completely break free from Danish rule and establish the nation-state of Iceland. This called for a change in identity, a significant task in itself. So, Jónas digs deep into the proudful collective memory of the Commonwealth period, where the Icelandic Sagas became the cornerstone of a newfound identity.

Jón Gnarr, on the other hand, wrote his words when the effect of the 2008 economic collapse was still hitting Icelanders hard, resulting in a serious ‘brain drain,’ as his fellow citizens were leaving Iceland for a more prosperous and promising future abroad. What followed was an endless discussion of the corruption and opacity of Icelandic politics. Nationwide strikes were raging, and in one opinion poll after another, people’s reaction was to ignore the old political parties. Instead, they directed their votes towards a new and seemingly more democratic but inexperienced ‘outside the box’ party, such as the Best Party.<sup>5</sup>

Not even Reykjavik’s iconic and looming mountain Esja stands tall when dark storm clouds of chaos are glooming. In this case, precisely in such circumstances as these, confronted with the downside of modernization, globalization, and neoliberalism, people wake up and seek ways to unite individuals or ethnic groups, restore cultural unity and re-create collective memory.<sup>6</sup> When the present is unsettling and chaotic, people nostalgically and selectively look to a calm and idyllic past and imagine a time when the sun was shining, and people had faith in the system and the future. Such re-creation of the collective memory of Icelanders is an ongoing thing. The economic collapse has mostly been dealt with, and for the time being, the focus is on the cultural change that immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers bring. The cultural currents of the ‘others’ need somehow be integrated and become part of everchanging Icelandic culture.

When breaking away from Danish rule and gaining complete independence in June of 1944, the approximately 127.700 Icelanders were pretty much a homogeneous group of people. As the nation prospered and the population grew, job opportunities gradually caught the attention of outsiders. Now, in time of globalization, with a population of

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<sup>5</sup> The Best Party, a satirical political party that parodies Icelandic politics and aims to make the life of the citizens more fun, managed a plurality in the 2010 municipal elections in Reykjavík, with the party gaining six out of 15 seats on the Reykjavík City Council (34.7 percent of the vote). Jón Gnarrs political platform included promises of “free towels in all swimming pools, a polar bear for the Reykjavík zoo, all kinds of things for weaklings, Disneyland in Reykjavík, a ‘drug-free’ Parliament by 2020, sustainable transparency”. Both before and after being elected, Jón announced that he would not go in for a coalition government with anyone that had not watched the HBO series *The Wire*. Ultimately, his Best Party entered into a coalition with Samfylkingin, the Social-Democratic Alliance as its junior partner to govern Reykjavík.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism: Anthropological perspectives*, 3.ed., London: Pluto Press, 2010, pg. 120-130.



368.792,<sup>7</sup> Icelanders are no longer homogeneous even though some immigrants seem to be ‘more Icelandic’ than others. Of all the new and different cultural traits in Iceland, the Muslims seem to be bringing in the most foreign one, and thus most difficult for integration, or such is the news reaching Iceland from the neighboring countries.

## 1.1 Why this thesis?

It is fair to say that globalization has brought new dynamics and complexities into Western societies, including Iceland. It affects individual personal identity, collective national identity, and solidarity all at once. Globalization has brought widespread conflicts and tremendous upheaval in some cases, where massive migration and global culture flow calls for a significant adjustment of identity for many.

How does society handle first-generation immigrants that do not align with traditional notions associated with national culture? What happens with the second and third generations? Will they ever truly be accepted, or will they end up as victims of social demarcation? How does little Iceland adjust, preserve, and promote solidarity amongst its relatively few inhabitants? Should the borders mostly or entirely be closed to foreign culture and value systems? Or are these questions too quaint and not aligned with the realities of the 21st century? It is not difficult to close the borders since Iceland is a relatively small island in the middle of the Atlantic. No wall is needed for such a task, and a small number of individuals express such inclination in social media. The majority knows this would arguably diminish the nation’s growth potential and leave them ‘heimsk’ (the Icelandic word for ignorance, caused by seclusion, not leaving home, nor receiving outsiders). Closing the borders of Iceland to immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers is not anywhere on the horizon. No formal ultra-rightwing political party exists in Iceland, and to this day, none of the existing parties have played the ‘fear of foreigners card’ in their political campaigns. Even if ultra-rightwing ideology is not to be found in the hearts of most Icelanders, they still have to adjust to the influx of immigrants and embrace the cultural change both in the private and public sphere.

The economic growth of the last two or three decades in Iceland, accompanied by very low or close to zero unemployment at times, created a need for working people in Iceland, not least in the construction business and fishing industry. Most of Iceland’s immigrants come from Eastern Europe, and on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2020, 20.477 people of Polish

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<sup>7</sup> *Mannfjöldi*, Statistics Iceland, 22. March 2021, retrieved 30. March 2021, from <https://www.hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldi/mannfjoldinn-1-januar-2021/>.

descent make up 37% of all immigrants in the land.<sup>8</sup> Immigrants bring their cultural traits, including their religion, values, and religious customs. Eastern Europeans bring both Catholicism and Russian orthodoxy and affect religious statistics. The Lutheran State Church is still the largest religious organization in Iceland, but its membership is slowly decreasing in terms of percentage. The most foreign religious culture is brought into the mix by the still small Muslim population of Iceland, comprised mostly of immigrants and counting for 1.447 people.<sup>9</sup>

The growth or at least the increased visibility of Islam in the public sphere of Europe has stirred the former, relatively still, social waters of Scandinavia, as it has in most of Western Europe. Some controversial Islam-related issues, such as certain aspects of Sharia, equality, and women's rights, honor killings, and Jihadist groups, have stirred some debates and need to be solved on every level. Through dialogue and public policymaking, the big and essential questions surface, questions that need answering.<sup>10</sup>

The influx of refugees and migration into Iceland is only a fraction of most other European countries; still, it is causing heated discussions and showing signs of potential division. One of the most controversial issues is the current policy on asylum seekers, allowing individuals and whole families to be deported, even after being in Iceland for some years. Thus, Islam and Muslims are not always at the center of immigration discussion, but the seemingly different cultural values of the growing Muslim communities in the nation are of concern for some.

Icelandic authorities are looking to make provision for new decades of diversity management, where a lesson is learned from other European nations, gaining from their success and avoiding the pitfalls. Europe's way to a peaceful and cohesive continent seems to be a constant battle. Even in the fall of 2020, we have European leaders reacting to terrorist attacks in France and Austria. The EU's attention is back on religious extremism, and the demand for increased security has surfaced again. Both France and Germany

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<sup>8</sup> "Population development 2019", *Statistical Series*, Statistics Iceland, 2. November 2020, pg. 1, retrieved 1. April 2021, from <https://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/inhabitants/population-development-2019/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Religious organizations, Statistics*, Statistics Iceland, 1. December 2020, retrieved 1. April 2021, from <https://statice.is/statistics/society/culture/religious-organisations/>.

<sup>10</sup> Bassam Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear? Islamic migration and ethnicization of Islam in Europe", *Studies in ethnicity and nationalism*, 10:1/2010, pg. 126-157, here pg. 127, doi:10.1111/j.1754-9469.2010.01038.x, retrieved 3. November 2020, from

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229947317\\_Ethnicity\\_of\\_Fear\\_Islamic\\_Migration\\_and\\_the\\_Ethnicization\\_of\\_Islam\\_in\\_Europe](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229947317_Ethnicity_of_Fear_Islamic_Migration_and_the_Ethnicization_of_Islam_in_Europe).

Jocelyn Cesari, "Islam in the West: From immigration to global Islam", *Harvard Middle East and Islamic review*, 8/2009, pg. 148-175, here pg. 167.

consider a much tighter border control and calling for a reevaluation of Schengen's control-free travel. The task seems insurmountable. Either nation throws in the towel, gives up and retreats, or continues to search for the way ahead. Standing still and doing nothing is not an option.

One of the critical lessons from Europe is that a cohesive multicultural or intercultural society does not just happen. It takes a lot of effort on behalf of national and local governments, scholars, educational establishments, and the general public to see this realized. Muslims and a rigid Islamic creed get most of the blame for difficulties in Muslim integration into Western societies. The Muslim stereotype is an aggressive religious zealot, fully supportive of all Islamic extremist movements and only waiting to implement Sharia law in Europe. The Qur'an is portrayed as encouraging war against Satan of the West, Western culture, and values. If that is so, how can there ever be solidarity and harmony in the land?

This mindset is in and of itself a problem and the cause of many more. If allowed to take roots in Iceland, it will color all Muslim integration attempts and lead to Muslim demarcation and ghetto formation as it has in Europe. The thesis will show that this particular problem is not a religious problem per se and need not be a problem in Muslim integration. It is a human construct due to the 'othering' of Muslims.

An interdisciplinary approach of religious, anthropological, social, philosophical, and political theories is applied to prove the point.

## **1.2 Interdisciplinary Approach to Social Cohesion**

The short period of Muslim integration into Icelandic society has not come without debates, but it has been peaceful, and why should it not be? Iceland has never been at the ruling end of colonialism and has no history of direct conflict with Islamic nations near or far. Even if Iceland is a member nation of NATO and thus has participated in certain projects on NATO's behalf, Iceland has never been a partaker in any imperialistic action in the Middle East, or anywhere else for that matter, pushing for European secularism and liberal philosophy to be implemented prematurely in colonized countries.

So, there are no historic obstacles or accumulated hard feelings that should block the way towards a continual peaceful, cohesive society, one nation of people from different cultural backgrounds creating their shared culture, including Muslims. Iceland is, therefore, an unusual European example of how the discussion of Islam and Muslims is not layered upon a direct story of imperialism and colonialism.

This Master's thesis explores the continual peaceful cultural emerging of Islam into Icelandic society. The main argument against Muslim integration into Western democratic societies is the seeming impossibilities of the inflexible Islamic creed. Islam is perceived as a non-democratic belief system with allowance, if not a call, for gender inequality and other human rights violations. The reality is that unsuccessful integration and a future national cohesiveness on the count of Islam does not have to be a concern for Icelanders, Muslims or not.

The thesis will show a) *that as a religion, Islam per se is not a hindrance to successful Muslim integration into Icelandic society, and any such reason is to be found in a narrow-minded interpretation and a nationalistic demarcation of Muslims* b) *that interculturalism is the best available diversity management tool to embrace religious Muslims as part of Icelandic identity.*

We explore Islamic traditions and cultural influence as it is tied in with certain aspects of social and political science and could thus be a considering factor in future official stand and political policymaking. We will examine certain controversial Islamic issues pertaining to social cohesion and welfare. In comparing multiculturalism and interculturalism, we will discover the importance of religion in diversity management, evaluate majority cultural precedence and dissect the social demarcation of ethnic groups. The argument is constructed in six chapters.

*Chapter 2:* A theoretical chapter of social concepts. This chapter sets important foundational arguments on which other chapters will build. The concepts of race, nation-state, national identities, nationalism, ethnicity, and diversity management are not laws of nature. They are a social and human construct and can thus change and vary according to human mindset, decisions, and political policies. *Chapter 3:* Following the previous chapter on social concepts, it is essential to understand the social construct of Islamic societies and the identity construction of Muslims through the centuries. This chapter takes a brief look at the pluralistic flexibility of Islam in a diverse society; how this negative view of Muslims as a non-tolerant people is a relatively recent construct; and how the Islam-West relationship is colored by the loud voice and actions of minority extremists, thus affecting Muslim identity construction in Europe. *Chapter 4:* For a successful Icelandic Muslim identity construction and future cohesive national identity, a lesson from Europe teaches us: There needs to be appropriate social and political policy implementation built on pluralism, understanding, and provision for religious lifestyles. Here we lay down essential concepts and thoughts on the relationship of nation-state and religion in diversity management. *Chapter 5:* Integration is a two-way street. It is thus

important to understand Icelandic identity construction and nationalistic view. What does an Icelander look like, sound like, smell like - can just anyone be an Icelander? What about skin color, social and religious values, and the language, the purity of the Icelandic language? Iceland, culture flow, and change are the theme of chapter five. *Chapter 6:* As we in previous chapters have established the fact that possible future hindrances to successful Muslim integration into Icelandic society are only found in human mindset and the ‘*otherizing*’ of Muslims and not in Islam itself, we now explore the best available diversity management tool for religiously diverse Iceland. *Chapter 7:* Now the crunch of the matter in most all Islam discussions in Iceland, Sharia. No matter the data in chapters 2-6, Muslims can never properly integrate and become real Icelanders; Sharia prevents it. Does it now? In Muslim integration, it is crucial to understand Sharia and its implementation. It is the ‘path to water’ and an integral part of life for Muslims, but for others, Sharia is foreign and the real reason for Muslims’ demarcation. Sharia is the final issue to integrate Muslims successfully into Icelandic society.

As this thesis is not without rich religious elements, the Holy Book of the Qur’an is a source of both informative and directive resources. The subject of race, nationalism, ethnicity, culture, and identity is key to understanding the current situation of the land and, therefore, the key to change and continual cultural recreation. This is where we start.

## 2 To Belong

*“Nationalistic ideology is void without land, acceptance,  
and independence to realize it.”*

Magnús Þorkell Bernharðsson<sup>11</sup>

The primary biological definition of species is that of a group whose members can interbreed and produce fertile offspring. Homo sapiens or modern humans are regarded as a single species with minimal genetic variations and therefore considered a single subspecies. Despite this biological fact, man tends to classify and identify themselves in different groups, which may be helpful and harmless. Modern science has classified humanity into different races, a beneficial separation for their work in genetics, disease studies, and other studies of the nature and life of man. One such biological race-based classification is the geographical approach. It identifies similar clusters of populations that differ from others in terms of allele frequency and phenotypic characteristics. Classification of humanity is, however, slightly older than modern science. Classification by skin color can be found on medieval world maps, and the idea of human diversity was established around about 1500.<sup>12</sup>

If there is no biological difference between defined races, the most logical conclusion is that race and ethnic groups are purely social phenomena. Then the source of one's identity and even racism is found in a cultural upbringing and the understanding of otherness. We know that human beings place themselves in the world, organizing and identifying themselves within a system of beliefs, customs, and culture. There is no culture-free living, but human culture is re-created repeatedly; such adjustability lies within human existence.

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<sup>11</sup> Magnús Þorkell Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2018, pg. 74.

<sup>12</sup> John Relethford, *The human species: An introduction to biological anthropology*, 8th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010, pg. 14, 367.

Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Ég er ekki með kynþáttafordóma en...Hugtakið kynþáttur og íslenskt samfélag”, *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum V*, editor Úlfar Hauksson, Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, 2004, pg. 575-585, here pg. 576.

Halldór Nikulás Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur: Þjóðernisafmörkun múslima í Evrópu*, BA-Thesis, Félags- og mannvísindadeild: Háskóli Íslands, 2016, pg. 8-9.

## 2.1 Nation-States and Nationhood

Durrenberger and Erem<sup>13</sup> claim that the idea of different races is a cultural creation originating in the heart of European nation-states during the 16th and 17th centuries. They argue that a certain ideology was behind the race classification. A homogenous group of people with a common language and unique cultural traits lives and works in harmony within certain boundaries. Borders define the nation-state with its government, which takes care of the people and protects them from the foreigners of other states. A fundamental concept is a territorial group with a shared history, one language, one government, and one culture. The logical consequence of this European ideology is dividing the world into such defined groups, and a geographical terminology for a race is born. Accordingly, it seems that the idea of nation-states and national borders is deeply rooted in European mentality, which in return could, to some degree, explain why some of the European states feel so threatened recently with the influx of transnational refugees and immigrants. It could also explain the controversial dividing up of the Middle East into nation-states, with grave consequences for many.

Machery and Faucher<sup>14</sup> say that in the evolution of man and human society, mother nature assigns us a kind of intellectual activity, which leads us to respect and preserve the heritage that our group has developed. And not only that, but we have also developed an intellectual system dedicated to the various views of the group. They say this is the foundation for understanding race and racist thinking. Conclusively, the idea of higher ethnicity, higher cognitive systems, and superior intellect is not individualistic but systemic. If so, then racism has its roots in the social system and understanding of one's ethnic heritage and the comprehension of others. Such a view is consistent with a point that Durrenberger and Erem<sup>15</sup> argue, that racism is not a matter of an individual attitude but a racist social system. This hypothesis about the roots of race and racism harmonizes with the writings of Kristin Loftsdóttir,<sup>16</sup> who says that scholars in anthropology are now studying the identity construct of people and communities to shed light on racism and racial prejudice.

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<sup>13</sup> E. Paul Durrenberger and Suzan Erem, *Anthropology unbound*, 2nd ed., Boulder London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010, pg. 25-43.

<sup>14</sup> Edouard Machery and Luc Faucher, "Social construction and the concept of race", *Philosophy of Science*, 72/2005, pg. 1208-1219, here pg. 1213-1214.

<sup>15</sup> Durrenberger and Erem, *Anthropology unbound*, pg. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Loftsdóttir, „Ég er ekki með kynþáttafordóma en... pg. 576.

It seems that territories are less important now in the era of globalization, neoliberalism, and large-scale migration around the world. Saunders<sup>17</sup> suggests that the term ‘nation’ is now based more on imaginary and timeless cipher relationships, whether family ties are blood ties or provided in some way with symbolic (ritual) consent. In practice, this means that a group of people believe in a shared history, customs, and values called culture. It is human to signify what is considered necessary, and therefore this unification is reinforced by the elite with rhetoric, rituals, and strengthening attitudes in every way.<sup>18</sup> This view is supported by Kristín Loftsdóttir,<sup>19</sup> who states that a national image is a kind of a stereotype that emphasizes a multitude of symbols, and the nation’s presentation of itself is about the repetition of such stereotypes and stories. With increased immigration, this nationalistic stereotype changes in its outlook and behavior and will continue to do so.

In his book *The Multicultural Riddle*, Gerd Bauman<sup>20</sup> says that the concept of nationalism is a human invention, even though its contents come from nature. What turns a group of people into a nation? First and foremost, a community of sentiment, Max Weber<sup>21</sup> says, a sentiment where the collective will, is the driving force behind it. This is consistent with the view of the French linguist and religionist Ernest Renan.<sup>22</sup> When he studied the defining elements of the term ‘nation’ such as race, language, religion, collective cultural traditions, and geographical demarcation, he concluded that none of these elements were sufficiently well defined. He concludes that a collective will of individuals primarily defines nationality. He said that the life of a nation is a daily vote. Thus, it can be concluded that ‘daily voting’ of this kind determines who can be a part of the nation at any given time, what immigrants can and who cannot.

Studies show that when national identities are emphasized, people’s attitudes to minorities and diversity, in general, grow harsher.<sup>23</sup> It most often leaves the whole discussion of nationhood in the hands of the populists, which seems to be happening in

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<sup>17</sup> Robert A. Saunders, “The ummah as nation: A reappraisal in the wake of the Cartoons affair”, *Nations and nationalism*, 14/2008, pg. 303-321, here pg. 306, retrieved 15. February 2016, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2008.00322.x>.

<sup>18</sup> Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, “Stríðsmaður og friðarhöfðingi”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 2/2014, pg. 72-79.

<sup>19</sup> Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Útrás Íslendinga og hnattvæðing hins þjóðlega: Horft til Silvíu Nætur og Magna”, *Ritið* 1/2007, pg. 159-176, here pg. 161.

<sup>20</sup> Gerd Bauman, *The multicultural riddle*, New York: Routledge, 1999, pg. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Max Weber, “The nation”, *Nationalism*, editors John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pg. 21-25.

<sup>22</sup> Guðmundur Hálfánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið: Uppruni og endimörk*, Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag og Reykjavíkur-akademían, 2001, pg. 15-45, here pg. 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> Will Kymlicka, “Defending diversity in an Era of Populism: Multiculturalism and Interculturalism compared”, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 158-177, here pg. 173.



Europe. Pro-diversity groups are fighting for multicultural/intercultural communities, while more conservative groups focus on solidarity and identity, national security, and national citizenship, often at the cost of immigrants and minorities. Why one or the other? With an interdisciplinary solution-oriented approach to the task, a nation can create solidarity, a strong national identity, and a sense of belonging amid diversity.

Because of the immense and unifying force of nationalism, one can conclude that the debate and discourse on the existence of nations can make a difference for Europe of the future and the entire process of integration of immigrants into the continent. One complicating factor is transnationality with social, cultural, economic, and political relations far beyond the host country's borders. Transnational immigrants thus live their lives across national borders.<sup>24</sup> Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Anna Wojtynska<sup>25</sup> point out that research on social conditions of immigrants has shifted from national background and integration onto mobility and transnational relations.

This transnationalism could be a key in understanding today's fermentation of '*ummahism*' within the Muslim world. In this context, Saunders<sup>26</sup> says that because of the diverse national background of Muslims in the diaspora, they find harmony and unity in the faith across borders and cultural traditions, and such is the ideology behind a global ummah. Adaption difficulties and sometimes severe ethnical demarcation and discrimination of Muslim immigrants, even to second and third-generation descendants in the new homeland, bring them together in a community of collective beliefs and traditions that can overshadow the division that may exist between the groups in their old Muslim homelands. This only brings to light the complex relations of different and possibly nationalistic groups that European nations now have within their borders. The need to belong is strong, whether identifying with a nation or an ethnic group.

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<sup>24</sup> Ralph Grillo, "Islam and Transnationalism", *Journal of ethnic and migration studies* 30:5/2004, pg. 861-878, here pg. 864-865.

<sup>25</sup> Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Anna Wojtynska, "Líf á tveimur stöðum: Vinna eða heimili?", *Ritið* 7:2-3/2007, pg. 79-93, here pg. 83.

<sup>26</sup> Saunders, "The ummah as nation", pg. 304.

## 2.2 Ethnicity

*Our identity is partially shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning some in false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.*

Charles Taylor<sup>27</sup>

The concept of a race could be traced to ethnic groups. Ethnic groups consist of 500 to several thousands of people and even millions, such as Yoruba of West Africa (Nigeria, Togo, Benin, and elsewhere) and the Han people in China, but they make up close to 92% of the Chinese population. Ethnic groups are formed around collective culture. They share a cultural heritage that is transmitted from generation to generation; an intellectual heritage of traditions, beliefs, values, criteria, choice, and cooperation. They speak the same language, and the consensus and cooperation borders on nationalism; this is an indivisible unit.<sup>28</sup> It harmonizes with Eriksen's view that the concept of ethnicity has to do with the relation between groups that consider themselves and are considered by others culturally different.<sup>29</sup> Bear in mind that this is true for minority and majority groups in any given country.

The differentiation between ethnic groups can be either negative or positive. A dichotomization is a differentiation of unfavorable comparisons between groups, while complimentarization is positive. Whether the relationship is positive or negative, it is precisely the contact between them that defines modern ethnic groups, not the separation.<sup>30</sup> For ethnicity to exist, groups must have a minimal relationship with the 'other' and consider themselves culturally different. In the absence of such relations, it is not possible to speak of ethnicity because it is defined by the relationship, not by the property of the groups.<sup>31</sup> Group's identity depends on its claim for collective cultural uniqueness or traits and that the group can demonstrate such identity. The call for identity is only reached with

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and The Politics of recognition: An Essay*, editor Amy Gutmann, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pg. 25-26.

<sup>28</sup> Machery and Faucher, "Social construction and the concept of race", pg. 1211-1212.

<sup>29</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Abner Cohen, "Ethnicity and politics", *Ethnicity*, editors John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, chapter 13, here pg. 83-84.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur*, pg. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 16-17.

the proper demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The demarcation confirms the importance of a shared sentiment within the group and the collective view of outsiders.<sup>32</sup> Only when a cultural difference is perceived to be important and regularly affects the interaction between groups can we speak of ethnic elements.

Such groups may or may not be separated by geographical boundaries, but first and foremost, the boundaries are social. Boundaries determine who belongs to the group and who does not. Such relationships can be maintained if both or all parties play the game, which means that the relationship can also be further extended and developed to accommodate increased diversity.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, if there is dichotomization, there will be a call for decreased relations and the importance of mutual understanding. This can lead to limitations in relations and communication, even on issues of common interests. So, as long as ethnic groups are maintained with differentiation and social boundaries, cultural differences will remain.<sup>34</sup> This being the case, the ummah could be seen as a denationalization of certain groups and the formation of a new and global ethnic group of Muslims, where Muslim demarcation is prevalent, like in Europe.

In most parts, political multiculturalism is Europe’s public integration policy but has not sufficed to stop Muslim demarcation and ghetto forming, thus maintaining ethnic boundaries.

## 2.3 Nation-State and Multiculturalism

*Ethnicity, race, and nation should be conceptualized not as substances  
or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals  
– as the imagery of discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded and  
enduring ‘groups’ encourages us to do – but rather in relational,  
processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms.*

Rogers Brubaker<sup>35</sup>

By definition, a multicultural society is a society where public policy and processes are in place to maintain and support different cultural characteristics of all the groups that make

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<sup>32</sup> Floya Anthias, “Intersectionality, belonging and translocational positionality: Thinking about transnational identities”, *Ethnicity, Belonging and Biography: Ethnographical and biographical perspectives*, editors Gabriela Rosenthal and Artur Bogner, Berlin: LIT, 2009, pg. 231-232.

<sup>33</sup> Fredrik Barth, “Ethnic groups and boundaries”, *Ethnicity*, editors John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pg. 75-82, here pg. 79.

<sup>34</sup> Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavík*, pg. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups”, *European Journal of Sociology* 43/2002, pg. 163-189, here pg. 167.

up society.<sup>36</sup> Let us look at the two central immigration policies in Europe being implemented over the last few decades. We find *Multiculturalism* firstly, with the United Kingdom at the forefront of implementation (outside of Europe, there are such nations as Canada and Australia). The aim is to have a society of many culturally different groups living in harmony. With Muslims in mind, this policy calls for treating all Muslims in the UK as one minority group, a group that enjoys a special status in society because of its cultural heritage. Secondly, there is the *Assimilation* policy that France has adhered to, which, again for Muslims, entails citizenship for them all as individuals. The state does not consider them to be separate from the rest of society. No special treatment because of cultural heritage, nationality, or religion.<sup>37</sup> The Emerging *national civic policy* has the characteristics of a revamped assimilation policy, placing duties over rights.<sup>38</sup>

Multiculturalism has been the leading policy since introduced as a new concept for social order in post-war Europe. The need for and reception of immigrants into Europe called for a new approach to integration since assimilation was considered too coercive and inconsiderate. It did not coincide with the liberal democratic philosophy of unity, freedom, and equality.<sup>39</sup> Different multiculturalism approaches were formulated, where cultural diversity meant freedom for both majority and minority groups to live according to their own cultural identity. The key issues were:

- a) Freedom within the law for minorities to live and maintain their identity without assimilative coerciveness.
- b) Equal treatment and respect for all minority groups, without cultural discrimination.
- c) Integration of minorities to become valuable, contributing members of society.

The central focus of multiculturalism is to bring together and uphold societal diversity and unity without violating the liberty and equality of minorities. The wider majority is already united, so how does one accommodate diversity within the existing unity? - By expanding and redefining the foundation.

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<sup>36</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 177-178.

<sup>37</sup> Christian Joppke, "A Christian identity for the liberal state?", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64/2013, pg. 597-616, here pg. 600.

<sup>38</sup> Ricard Zapata-Barrero, "Interculturalism in post-multicultural debate: a defense", *Comparative Migration Studies* 5:14/2017, pg. 1-23, here pg. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, "Afterword: Multiculturalism and Interculturalism-A Critical Dialogue", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 266-279, here pg. 266-267.

Multiculturalism in Europe means a political accommodation by the state/dominant group for all minority cultures. A minority is, first and foremost, defined by race, ethnicity, or religion, but also and much more controversially, by cultural identities such as nationality and aboriginality. It means that citizenship in the state is not dependent on the cultural identity of its citizens, and the essence of cultural pluralism is that different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups should all have equal access to power or economic and political resources.

The diversity management approach of multiculturalism and multicultural citizenship is based on cultural rights, attributing certain cultural traits to individuals and groups. It calls for complex problem solving where the connection of culture and identity is something to be overcome if it is to be realized. Certain difficulties appear in multicultural relations when facing the liberal individualism of Europe. As the state emphasizes each citizen's equal rights and obligations, some minority groups may feel that their cultural heritage is not valued and respected. Moreover, where cultural diversity is pushed, there is a risk that minority groups will find themselves discriminated against, as is often the case in multicultural societies.<sup>40</sup> It is a complex thing for minority groups to 'negotiate' or 'renegotiate' their identity where power is the primary variable. Gerd Bauman<sup>41</sup> discusses this complex phenomenon of multiculturalism and how difficult it seems to be in implementation. How to achieve a just society of equality among the three different groups a) those who want a single unified national culture b) those who trace their cultural heritage and identity to a single ethnic group c) those who view their religion as the only true culture.

Multiculturalism in Europe has been under heavy scrutiny the last few years and has even been declared a failed endeavor. It is argued that multiculturalism ignores or at least does not prioritize people's interactions, and its focus is on the cultural difference rather than similarities and what people have in common. In other words, it ignores interaction and communal dialogue. Multiculturalism is thus said to be obsessed with cultural differences, with the tendency to segregate and encourage societal fragmentation rather than cohesiveness.<sup>42</sup> It is also said to lead the way for cultural relativism, where each culture group is a self-contained whole, a world unto itself, and should not be judged by outside cultures. Critiques of multiculturalism point out that people do not live together

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<sup>40</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 150, 174-176.

Bauman, *The multicultural riddle*, pg. 97, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Bauman, *The multicultural riddle*, pg. 97-99.

<sup>42</sup> Parekh, "Afterword: Multiculturalism and Interculturalism-A Critical Dialogue", pg. 270-271.

but alongside each other in separate groups. They say this undermines social solidarity and thus the basis for multicultural justice.<sup>43</sup> The separation leads to ghettos in many European cities and can be seen in both Denmark and Sweden. Diversity does not create distrust, but this kind of segregation and social demarcation is a critical factor in societal distrust and disturbances. On the other hand, intercultural citizenship seeks to restore social cohesion, trust, and a sense of belonging together (see chapter 6).

Those in favor of the continued implementation of multiculturalism fervently defend it and say that it should not be discredited due to bad policy design or implementation. In the 2008 White Paper of The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (COE 2008),<sup>44</sup> the multicultural issues are addressed:

*In what became the western part of a divided post-war Europe, the experience of immigration was associated with a new concept of social order known as multiculturalism. This advocated political recognition of what was perceived as the distinct ethos of minority communities on a par with the 'host' majority. While this was ostensibly a radical departure from assimilationism, in fact multiculturalism frequently shared the same, schematic conception of society set in opposition of majority and minority, differing only in endorsing separation of the minority from the majority rather than assimilation to it....*

*...Whilst driven by benign intentions, multiculturalism is now seen by many as having fostered communal segregation and mutual incomprehension, as well as having contributed to the undermining of the rights of individuals – and, in particular, women – within minority communities, perceived as if these were single collective actors. The cultural diversity of contemporary societies has to be acknowledged as an empirical fact. However, a recurrent theme of the consultation was that multiculturalism was a policy with which respondents no longer felt at ease.*

Current hesitation regarding the effectiveness of multiculturalism is clearly seen in the questionnaire responses received for the 2008 White Paper:

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Loobuyck, "Towards an Intercultural Sense of Belonging Together", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 225-245, here pg. 233.

<sup>44</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Living together as Equals in Dignity: White Paper in Intercultural Dialogue*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2008, pg. 18-19, 9, retrieved 20. February 2021, from [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper\\_final\\_revised\\_en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf).

*The responses to the questionnaires sent to member states, in particular, revealed a belief that what had until recently been a preferred policy approach, conveyed in shorthand as ‘multiculturalism,’ had been found inadequate. On the other hand, there did not seem to be a desire to return to an older emphasis on assimilation. Achieving inclusive societies needed a new approach, and intercultural dialogue was the route to follow.*

The center of the multicultural debate is the neglect of intergroup relations and the interactive personal contact of people with different origins. Political leaders in 2011, such as Cameron of the United Kingdom, Merkel of Germany, and Sarkozy of France, did promote this argument against multiculturalism, even to the point of declaring it dead.<sup>45</sup>

How, in practical terms, has this affected Muslims in Europe? Oliver Roy<sup>46</sup> insists that neither assimilation nor multiculturalism seems to be working well, as the multicultural program tends to form a minority of Muslims in ghettos, and assimilation ignores the Muslims’ search for a new identity. Thus, the identity of many European Muslims is being challenged to the degree that a formation of a large-scale Muslim ethnic group becomes an attractive option. This is a vicious circle, as Muslim demarcation encourages such tendencies. A society that does not embrace its new citizens, to the point that they have to seek their identity somewhere else, even unwillingly, has failed in its diversity management.

Iceland’s cultural diversity management policy is mostly, if not wholly, written by members of the majority group with the goal of minority integration, even if some Islamic issues are lurking in the back of their minds. What about the Muslim side of integration? Do Islam and Islamic history prevent them in any way or form from identifying entirely with their new home in an Icelandic pluralistic society?

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<sup>45</sup> Ricard Zapata-Barrero, “Theorizing Intercultural Citizenship”, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 53-76, here pg. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Olivier Roy, “Europe’s response to radical Islam”, *Current history*, 104:685/2005, pg. 360-364, here pg. 363, retrieved 22. June 2020, from <http://www.currenthistory.com/Article.php?ID=365>.

### 3 Pluralism in Islam and Muslim Identity Construction

*Sorry to say, the discourse in Iceland, Scandinavia, Western Europe, and the U.S. is often unfortunate and dominated by generalizations. All Muslims are considered alike, even though not all Muslims are Islamists, far from it. This discourse reaches the ears of Muslims and is both provoking and insulting. The rise of Islamists is a dangerous trend within the Muslim community, but thankfully it has no connection to the core of their faith but is a new and radical interpretation. It is our misfortune how widespread this interpretation now is. However, our fortune is found in being well informed and aware, and with increased understanding and responsible discourse, we can hope for a better world with different religions side by side in peace and harmony.*

Magnús Porkell Bernharðsson<sup>47</sup>

September 11, 2001 was not the first day of profound impact between the Muslim world and the West, but it was a defining day. It drastically changed how Western societies view Muslims, their culture, and Middle Eastern societies. The attack on Twin Towers was criminal and is not an appropriate action for godly people of true faith. While it is only natural that such terrorist attacks cause fear and precaution in the hearts of many, calling it a clash of civilizations and thus proving the impossibility of all Muslim integration in Europe is not a logical conclusion.

Magnús Porkell Bernharðsson<sup>48</sup> points out that a recent Pew Research Center survey shows that 85% of Middle East citizens oppose the Jihadist movements. He says we Westerners tend to underestimate and ignore the severity of the Middle East's historical difficulties and thus overlook the silent majority and turn our hearing towards the loud minority voice of Jihadists. So, the Muslim stereotype is enforced, and islamophobia is prevalent within Western societies. The tendency is to look at all Muslims as a single homogeneous group, as single collective actors.

There are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims in the world, living in seven very different cultural and geographical areas. Yes, there is an Arabization of Islam, but only about 20% of all Muslims live in these countries today. Nevertheless, as Europeans think of Islam, they mostly think of the Middle East. As they think of Muslims, they mainly think of Jihadist groups, convinced that Islam does not allow for a democratic society, is

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<sup>47</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 273-274.

<sup>48</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 327-328.



intolerant to other religions, supports gender inequality, and has little or no respect for human rights in general. The golden era of Islam tells a different story.

### 3.1 Islamic Golden Era and Pluralism

Studies of the contextual background of Islam show how important urban settings and permanent residency were. The Prophet's message was about faith and religion, an Islamic state, and the spread of a new custom, not to mention new ethics. The well-known Islamic scholar, Seyyid Hossein Nasr, suggests that Islam is all in one, a religion, a civilization, and a social order based on revealed principles of the religion. It is an archetypal reality, residing eternally in the Divine Intellect, he says.<sup>49</sup>

The Qur'an addresses multiple issues of the human-divine relationship, such as faith, religious duties, repentance, forgiveness, and the afterlife. It also deals with the responsibilities of humanity towards God's creation. It is fair to say that Muslims have had some difficulties interpreting the content and meaning of the Qur'an from the beginning, and despite their conviction of the universal value of Islam as one religion and one custom, people have not always agreed on the doctrine. It is important to keep in mind that the interpretation of the revelation in history is tied to and dependent on the social context.<sup>50</sup> Right from the beginning, the Prophet's message must have raised heaps of questions, started heated debates, and caused countless controversies. To better understand the power and potential upheaval manifested in his revelation, we need only look at the environment and social context in which it first is revealed and manifested; a culturally diverse community of religious mixity.

The pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was a pluralistic mixture of the dominant paganism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. By his admission, Muhammad did not bring a new religion but a reformation to the existing ones to bring the Jewish and Christian God to the Arab people.<sup>51</sup> From a theological point of view, God had created a community of people to whom he longed to speak, with both global and eternal consequences. The revelation was clear, and the call for radical change was strong, without excuse, and as is the case with most messages from prophets, it was not undisputed. 'Honor your parents,' 'take care of the orphans,' 'give alms,' 'fight against all injustice and

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<sup>49</sup> Brian Morris, *Religion and anthropology: A critical introduction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pg. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear?" pg. 134.

Ingrid Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, 2.ed., Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pg. 22.

Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, new edition, London: Arrow Books, 2011, pg. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 17.

oppression,' 'belief in the one God Allah' who was going to bring all this about. Muslims were to show kindness and compassion in action. Allah thus represented a moral power that could be invoked beyond the traditional power of the tribes.<sup>52</sup> However, even though the Qur'an certainly speaks of the moral responsibility of man and the just conduct in all actions, it can never be the manifesto of social activists or political reformers, as is its usage of some groups today. The Qur'an always places great emphasis on divine will and guidance in all that one undertakes.<sup>53</sup>

In implementing these moral principles, Prophet Muhammad established the Constitution of Medina, a social contract with Christians, Jews, and other groups in Medina. As such, he laid the foundation for future pluralistic elements in the Islamic rule of law. This pluralism could be seen for hundreds of years in the Ottoman Empire and the Mughal Dynasty of South Asia.

Islam spread across the Arab world and beyond. By the eighth or ninth century, Muslims ruled the Middle East; their golden era had come. Through the taxpaying protection status, *dhimmi*, different groups and nations of other religions could live peacefully within the region, and a pluralistic approach to community building was developed. Later in the Ottoman Empire, the rulers introduced the *millet* system,<sup>54</sup> or the dividing up of people according to their faith, following their rule of law. Each millet had its religious leaders responsible for solving any problems within the millet and being accountable to the authorities. Islamic rulers had set up an exemplary pluralistic policy of their days, a certain kind of a forerunner to modern-day multiculturalism. As Bernharðsson points out, it was not a system built on equality but on acknowledging plurality and social necessity.

Northern Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, and the Balkans, India, and Afghanistan all experienced the pluralistic reign of the Muslim Ottoman Empire and the Mughal Dynasty. Then, under European influence, the Ottomans changed the status of the Jewish and Christian minority groups in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century to being citizens with legal rights on par with Muslims, and their taxes were lowered to the Muslim level. A new constitution of the empire was written in 1876, emphasizing freedom and equality for all ethnic groups,

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<sup>52</sup> Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 3, 46, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and woman: Reading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pg. 11.

Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 52-54.

opening doors for everyone to enter into high-level government positions and the military.<sup>55</sup> In hindsight, this is all part of the Islamic reformation, as most religious systems have to go through to survive. And so is all setback to that reform.

If Muslims could live and thrive in a pluralistic environment for over 400 years, why not today? The loud voice of the Jihadists declares such plurality an impossibility, and this voice drowns out all other Islamic voices, it seems to be. Why this aggressive extreme ideology with this narrow legalistic interpretation of Islam? Why this hostility towards the Christian West and Jews? Even the Qur'an and the Prophet considered Jews and Christians to be 'People of the Book' belonging together in one united ummah with the Muslims.<sup>56</sup>

*The believers, as well as the Jews, the Sabeans and the Christians: all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds, will have nothing to fear and they will not grieve.*

The Qur'an 5:69

It has to do with interpretation. How should people interpret the eternal word of God, received in a specific social and historical context? Should it be interpreted in the light of the social context it was given, or can that be ignored and thus a literal interpretation is valid in our modern times? Is the Qur'an maybe a living word, able to speak into ever-changing social structures, time and time again, one century after another, and thus communicating God's will to all humanity independent of time. Or is the Qur'an completely locked down and inflexible as each verse of every surah calls for only one unchangeable interpretation, regardless of time and space? This is a real issue in Europe today, as Islamic extremist groups take the latter approach. Is their narrow and intolerant interpretation of the Qur'an the right Islamic way, or does it contradict the spirit of the message it contains?

Throughout history, political authorities have tried to impose such absolutism on different Muslim societies but failed repeatedly. Inherent pluralism in Islam is summarized by Abu Hafs Nasafi,<sup>57</sup> the twelfth-century Hanafi scholar: "Our school is correct with the possibility of error, and another school is in error with the possibility of being correct."

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<sup>55</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 101.

<sup>57</sup> Ed Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, pg. 71.

Why this backward, narrow-minded interpretation in modern times, with no respect to historical context? What happened at the end of the Ottoman Empire?

### **3.2 The West, Islamic Extremism and Qur'anic Interpretation**

*If religion can be interpreted in more than one way, then the interpretation depends first and foremost on what each one wants to draw from it and what the person is willing to accept. In other words, religion can say almost anything if there is a will, not to mention when taken out of context. The Khawarij separatist group showed this rhetorical and selective approach when taking a selected surah out of context to justify killing other Muslims in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and like with other extremist groups, no dialogue was possible, and they were completely blind in their error as they used the sacred text to defend their own views.*

Ingrid Mattson<sup>58</sup>

As one of the world's colonial masters, Denmark wanted to show off their colonial endeavor. So, in 1905 a colonial exhibition was held in Copenhagen. Some blessed and fortunate Icelanders were featured in the exhibition catalog, supposed to stand for a show between Eskimos from Greenland and some colored and black people from Denmark's more southern colonies. Icelanders were utterly offended and refused to show up. The golden era of the ancient Icelandic Commonwealth was long gone, but pride and sense of dignity remained. What offended them was not that the Danes were showcasing real people as senseless creatures, but that white civilized European Icelanders were included as representatives of an oppressed, underdeveloped nation.<sup>59</sup> Not long after, the Mountain Woman (see chapter 5) surfaced with bountiful references to the golden era of the Icelandic Commonwealth.

When humiliated and offended, we react and fight to protect our self-worth and dignity. This is true of all, even if our fighting methods differ, and sometimes we get so blind-sighted that we forget the worth and dignity of other human beings. Muslim extremist groups use their conservative puritanical religious ideology to justify their means in restoring humiliated Islamic societies to former glory.

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<sup>58</sup> Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 191-193.

<sup>59</sup> Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Belonging and the Icelandic others: Situating Icelandic identity in a postcolonial context", *Whiteness and postcolonialism in the Nordic region*, editors Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, Surrey: Ashgate Press, 2012, pg. 57-71, here pg. 61-63.  
Gísli Pálsson and Sigurður Örn Guðbjörnsson, "Make no bones about it: The invention of homo islandicus", *Acta Borealia*, 28:2/2011, pg. 119-141, here pg. 127.

There never is just one factor that turns the course of history, but one can argue that a significant influence in the decline of Muslim rule and the gradual declining sense of dignity in the Middle East was the French Revolution and Bonaparte's invasion into Egypt. It was not so much the sword in Napoleon's hand that changed everything, as it was the sword in his mouth, the newly found Western philosophy of the Enlightenment. Modern civilization entered Egypt with a promise of freedom and the betterment of society.

With the help of the British, the Ottomans were able to get Egypt back under their rule in 1801, but everything had changed. A new modern world had opened up, and as the Ottomans entered into an international trade agreement with Britain, France, and Russia, they ended up losing their independence and became pawns in the chess game of globalization.<sup>60</sup> Many Muslims are still trying to come to grips with modernization, as a spiritual and religious approach to life is replaced with Western secular philosophy and concepts. An actual watershed event was still to occur, the First World War. The Ottomans sided with Germany and thus gained new enemies in their former allies of Britain, France, and Russia. The Middle East was deeply affected by the war, both in the loss of people, directly or indirectly related to the war and dividing up and creation of new nation-states and borders.<sup>61</sup>

*The state, not the empire, dynasty, or religious confessions, was affirmed as the building block of European order...The genius of this system, and the reason it spread across the world, was that its provisions were procedural, not substantive. If a state would accept these basic requirements, it could be recognized as an international citizen able to maintain its own culture, politics, religion, and internal policies, shielded by the international system from outside intervention.*

Henry Kissinger<sup>62</sup>

The Middle East was not ready to cope with the Westphalia system of nation-states with seemingly arbitrary lines in the sand, creating nations even where there was none before. The new nation-state's borders were not in the best interest of the Middle Eastern people;

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<sup>60</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 77.

<sup>62</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 115.

it served only the superpowers' interests.<sup>63</sup> The rest is history. The powerful Islamic giant had been slain and was now bowing before Western superpowers. The golden era ended in humiliation.

Things were never the same and never will be the same, but should there not be an attempt to rectify and restore? There are groups that most certainly think so, and since nothing much seems to be happening in that regard, they decide to take the matter into their own hands. We all know of them; many feel them, and some fear them; they are a political force in Islam, the Islamists.

Islamists come in different shapes and sizes, but their common goal is to establish a just Islamic state with Sharia as the law of the land. What does that mean? In short, it means that everyone committing *Haram* (forbidden acts by Sharia) should not only have to answer for it in the afterlife but should be punished in this life. The way to enforce this is to reinstate the *Caliphate*. This they believe will restore 'dignity lost.' The *Jihadists* believe that an armed battle is the only way to reach this goal. They consider infidels (mainly the West) or polytheists and all Muslims, not in agreement with them, to be sinners deserving punishment in hell, unless *Hakimiyyah* or God's government is established through a caliphate.<sup>64</sup> This intolerance of the extremist groups is based on their own literate interpretation of the Qur'an. They alone have the truth, as they take it out of context and confine all interpretation to fit their political conviction and mission in life. The idea of a caliphate to free all Muslims is the underlying ideology of all *Salafi-Jihadi* groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The belief is that all Muslim governments are apostates and *Takfir*; thus, all Muslims in a disagreement are declared to be *kafir*, or non-believers. This grave and sinful act against fellow Muslims legitimizes killing them.

The current conditions of instability and violence in the Middle East due to Islamic extremism have a relatively short history and do not reflect historical reality through the ages. The good news is that most Muslims and Muslim scholars state that this reaching into the past by the fundamentalist to recreate the original Muslim community is neither needed nor on their agenda.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 78-79.

Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 115.

<sup>64</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 316-317.

<sup>65</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 147.

Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 328.

Islamic scholars have sought to create a holistic system of all the elements that could be used to interpret and understand the Qur'an correctly. However, these various methods, tools, and implementations used throughout the centuries in a conservative, literal way, have helped create the stereotype that all Muslims are yoked to this interpretation of the Qur'an. This particular way excludes the historical context of the Prophet's time and considers all things relevant then, relevant today. The Salafi-Jihadi groups interpret the Qur'an to back up their ideology and place Sharia on par with the Holy Book as divine. This makes dialogue and debate almost impossible. Like with most religious texts, it is relatively easy to present an interpretation based on one's own wishful thinking and desire, even without realizing it.

*Fear, whim, greed, pride – how many potential barriers exist to block our understanding of the true meaning of God's words! Certainly, we need to be exceedingly cautious about claiming to have grasped the true meaning of the Qur'an. How much better would it be if we stopped making declarations for a while and humbly, earnestly, tried to listen to God?*

Ingrid Mattson<sup>66</sup>

The first generation of Muslims grew up with war stories of unscrupulous enemies and heroic deeds of militant soldiers. The discourse was colored by the spirit of the times, setting the standard for courage and decency of every true man. Then, as always, social circumstances and reigning discourse shape the individual, and the first Muslims lived in the time of zealous warriors who defended their honor. Into such a prevailing environment and circumstances, religions come and speak for themselves.

History tells us that the Muslim community in Medina engaged in numerous battles for their existence, and the Qur'an brings a revelation confirming the legitimacy and methods of fighting the war. Here is one such surah.

*Fighting is ordained for you, even though it repulses you. You may hate something that is good for you, or love something that is evil for you.  
God knows, but you do not.*

The Qur'an 2:216

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<sup>66</sup> Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 264.

War and conflict have been justified in the name of religion for as long as people remember, and it is not unique to Islam. Nevertheless, references to the incoherent letter of the law without a historical context have been and are still used to justify self-interest and other goals of various kinds. Another message used by the extremists, taken out of its historical context, is At-Tawbah 9:36.

*According to God on the day when He created heavens and earth, the number of months is twelve. Of these, four are sacred; this is the correct way.*

*So, do not wrong one another during them. However, fight against the unbelievers collectively as they fight against you collectively.*

*You should know that God is with those who are mindful of Him.*

The Qur'an 9:36

The unbelievers here are the polytheists in Mecca waging war on the ummah of Medina. Interpreting this message as an eternal call to wage war on all unbelievers and even other monotheists shows how narrow-minded and out of balance it can get. The context is the existing war with Koresh and Mecca at the time. Not factoring in the context is neither a logical nor a true interpretation of God's word, says Mattson.<sup>67</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, which according to Prophet Muhammad, was given by God, we read about similar instructions of war that the Hebrews were to wage on surrounding nations. How illogical wouldn't it be to proclaim it still being applicable today? Here is another interpretation, or rather a message that some have ignored with grave consequences.

*There is no compulsion in religion.*

The Qur'an 2:256

It is a known fact that people have both died for denying their conversion to Islam and leaving the faith. Mattson points out that 'There is no compulsion in religion' can not only mean that no one should be forced to take the faith, but it must also mean freedom to leave it. When God speaks, it is essential to listen and understand because how can the one who does not hear and the one who does not understand respond correctly to God's message?<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 218-219.

<sup>68</sup> Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 234.



*As a system of thought, jihadist Islamism is far from being the dominant ideology it is often portrayed as in the Western media. Yet it is powerful, no doubt because it is the only ideology that seems to offer relief from the victim status the Arabs delight in claiming (a status that in fact Islamism, jihadist or otherwise, is only too happy to confirm).*

Samir Kassir<sup>69</sup>

The translation of the Qur'an into different languages is changing how people read and understand the Holy Book. The *Quranists*<sup>70</sup> reject the hadith, the Sunna, and the Sharia as divine authorities in Islam, and they are among the fastest-growing international communities of Muslims. They call for the Qur'an to be the sole source of divine authority and thus strip away centuries of carefully constructed interpretation of the Ulama. They just could be introducing the *sola scriptura* of Islam as part of the Islamic reformation.

### **3.3 Europe and Muslims Identity**

*In the age of pressurized attention spans, sound bites and tweets, the nuance, context, and caveats of mainstream Muslim scholarship cannot compete with the simplistic clarity of extremists speaking the language of the engineers, scientists and doctors who dominate the elite of Arab societies. An organized minority is now in control of the discourse of the disorganized majority of Muslims. We cannot, in the name of pluralism and tolerating different views within Islam, tolerate intolerance.*

Ed Husain<sup>71</sup>

The rising level of immigrants and refugees in Europe is a significant political issue, as it is seen to pose a real threat to the homogeneity and distinctiveness of national, regional identities. This may, of course, be based on real fears about job losses, rising welfare costs, and in some cases, overcrowding; racist, xenophobic ignorance may also underpin it. Notably, the far-right and populist parties in many countries are increasingly exploiting this fear of erosion of a single national identity to build substantial support.<sup>72</sup> It is growing across most of Europe, including Austria, Belgium, Greece, Denmark, France, Germany,

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<sup>69</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 269.

<sup>70</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 285.

<sup>71</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 283.

<sup>72</sup> Ted Cantle, "The Case for Interculturalism, Plural Identities and Cohesion", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 133-157, here pg. 138.

Netherlands, and Sweden, to mention a few. Many Europeans do not realize how their reaction impacts European Muslims.

The increased visibility of Islam and Muslims in European public space has drastically pushed for sharper demarcation of identity, who are we, what does a true European look like, and what does it mean to be a Muslim? Cultural flow and re-creation of culture is not a new global phenomenon, and usually, there seems to be a good balance between tradition and cultural change. The visibility of what seems to be foreign cultural traits, such as Islamic cultural traditions, is now greater in Europe than ever before. This will affect the cultural criteria for allowing peaceful and harmonious living; it is changing the cultural identity of all Europeans, including Muslims.<sup>73</sup>

Arguably, the fear of losing collective culture and identity in Europe is one of the main reasons for the continent's current turmoil.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, this threat of 'identity lost' is not due to the mere presence of Muslims in Europe, but their increased visibility and perceived pressure on institutional value systems and other dominant values in the continent. Europe is looking into the face of potential cultural transformation, and some feel this change is coming too fast and in far too high doses to maintain security and well-being. The 'others' have entered 'our' space, and as culture bearers, they will affect us for the better or worse, depending on the viewer's values. Khan<sup>75</sup> states that Europeans now behave like a surrounded minority group, fearing losing their own identity. There is no turning back, and this will hardly be reversed, even though some wish for just that. Islam and Muslims will color Europe of the future with their cultural crayons, but coloring goes both ways. For peace and solidarity to prevail, it must.

Both Islam and Europe seek cultural purity. Muslims do not want to become victims of secularism, as they consider Westerners to be, and perhaps that is part of reluctance in integration. On the other hand, European states have called for cultural adaptation and integration from Muslims before their foreign culture is fully welcomed. All parties need to be willing and get involved in the dialogue that must take place. Non-Muslim Europeans must overcome their fear of culture flow, European governments must seek to alleviate

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<sup>73</sup> Longina Strumska-Cylwik, "Other/Otherness in Multicultural world and their diverse qualities and varieties in the context of an applied logic of reverse", *International Journal of Arts and Science*, 6:1/2013, pg. 35-55, here pg. 38-39, retrieved 10. November 2020, from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1419026905?accountid=135943>.

<sup>74</sup> M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Islam and the new Europe: The Remaking of a Civilization", *Global Dialogue* 9.3:4 /2007, pg. 19-32, here pg. 19.

Pippa Norris and Ronald F. Inglehart, "Muslim integration into Western cultures: Between origins and destinations", *Sage Journals, Political Studies*, 60:2/2012, pg. 228-251, here pg. 232, 247, retrieved 3. March 2021, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00951.x>.

<sup>75</sup> Khan, "Islam and the new Europe" pg. 19.

Muslim economic difficulties and Muslim ghettos, and Muslims themselves need to define what it is to be a European Muslim in a European community.<sup>76</sup>

In a world gone secular, true Muslims long for revelatory interpretation, showing them how to live a spiritual life in it. Preservation of religious heritage in a secular society was seen in the Jewish communities of Europe before the Enlightenment, and an argument can be made for it now being repeated in the Muslim diaspora of Europe.

Although most Europeans consider the ummah to be primarily a religious community, Saunders<sup>77</sup> considers it a new benchmark for flowing and borderless post-national identity. Since identity-politics is critical in political behavior, semi-nationalistic behavior could increase in the name of the ummah. In the minds of most Muslims, the term embraces a wide variety of concepts that are leading forces in a political, social, economic, and ethical context. Given the relationship between religion and politics in Islam, the concept of the ummah as a community of shared values inevitably has political references. Some even claim that the ummah stands for a united nation, a nation of Islamic teachings.<sup>78</sup> Sayyid Qutb, one of the leading ideologues of twentieth-century Islam, claims that religion is the only true nationality of Muslims and that the creator has given a portion of himself in the Qur'an for instruction.

The Qur'an is the *al-nab al-awwal*, or the original instruction, and therefore the only blueprint for constructing both secular and spiritual aspects of society.<sup>79</sup> However, history and experience have shown that Muslims disagree on politics and religion. Neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah clearly states how these relations should be, and the same goes for democracy within Islam.<sup>80</sup> Since Islam varies depending on time and geography, there seems to be no unified, all-inclusive link between the text and the social expression. It is not limited to Islam and is the case in most societies, regardless of religion.<sup>81</sup>

Ethnic conflicts have shaped the history of Islam, conflicts over power and access to resources, as between Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Furthermore, when it comes to religion, loyalty to the tribe often takes priority over the ummah, and today Muslims worldwide refuse to attend Friday prayers unless their *imam* or leader conducts it. It shows that

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<sup>76</sup> Khan, "Islam and the new Europe", pg. 26, 31.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavík*, pg. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Saunders, „The ummah as nation“, pg. 304-306.

<sup>78</sup> Sayed Khatib, "Arabism and Islamism in Sayyid Qutb's thought on nationalism", *The Muslim World*, 94/2004, pg. 217-240, here pg. 236-238.

<sup>79</sup> James Piscatori, *Islam in a world of nation-states*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pg. 103-106.

Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 252.

<sup>80</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, pg. 22.

<sup>81</sup> Morris, *Religion and anthropology*, pg. 82.

Muslims are not a single homogeneous group of people, and despite the seemingly clear Islamic criteria, it is impossible to assert that all Muslims are the same, practice their religion the same way and have the same outlook on life. Of course, there are common threads and elements, but as practitioners of other religions, Muslims are constantly ‘negotiating’ and ‘renegotiating’ their position regarding the creed that cultural tradition has left them. Despite this, Muslims in Europe’s diaspora create a nationalistic ummah and construct their identity around an imaginary society that has no basis in Islam.<sup>82</sup>

European nationalism views all Muslims alike, and racism induces nationalism where there is none. Thus, one can certainly argue that the ‘othering’ and demarcation of Muslims in Europe creates this particular Muslim identity construction. This imaginary ummah is abstract, non-regional, and manifests itself primarily in endless exchanges of opinions and debates on the internet. It is virtual, intangible, and utterly different from the local Muslim community. The internet has become the primary pathway for it and is an ideal ‘place’ to stir nationalistic fervor beyond nation-state borders. It has erased the geographical boundaries for transnational Muslims, which have controlled their world politics for centuries.<sup>83</sup> As Reza Aslan points out, this ummah is based on a shared sense of common interest, values, and concerns, not on creedal adherence.<sup>84</sup> Jihadists use the internet to reach young, alienated Muslims and offer them an alternative religious community and a solid new identity.

There was a time in history that religion was the defining factor in the ethnicity and culture of most societies. It was people’s social identity and, in fact, their citizenship.<sup>85</sup> It still is a major identity factor for Muslims, but not the only one. If our identity and how we view ourselves in a social context is dependent on how others think of us, view us, and speak of us, we can conclude that our self-awareness not only can but will develop and change through interaction and communicative dialogue with others.

Securitization framework is now affecting diversity management, thus preventing open, more embracing, and humanistic policies towards newcomers and even existing immigrants.<sup>86</sup> This, and the fact that second-generation immigrants in Europe seem to be inclined to religious and social radicalism, is calling for an in-depth reevaluation of

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<sup>82</sup> Tibi, “Ethnicity of fear?” pg. 131-132.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur*, pg. 20.

<sup>83</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The war for Muslim minds: Islam and the West*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pg. 7-8.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur*, pg. 25.

<sup>84</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 290.

<sup>85</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 81.

<sup>86</sup> Zapata-Barrero, “Interculturalism in the post-multicultural debate: a defense”, pg. 2.

cultural diversity management in multicultural Europe. The erasing of social boundaries and the battle for a culturally unified Europe is ongoing. Iceland needs to embrace the lessons learned and be proactive in its diversity management policymaking and implementation.

Religion remains one of the most controversial, misunderstood, and sometimes even mishandled identities on our way to cultural solidarity.

## 4 Nation-State and Religion

*Religion, it must be understood, is not faith. Religion is the story of faith. It is an institutionalized system of symbols and metaphors that provides a common language with which a community of faith can share with each other their numinous encounter with the Divine Presence. Religion is concerned not with genuine history, but with sacred history, which does not course through time like a river. Rather, sacred history is like a hollowed tree whose roots dig deep into primordial time and whose branches weave in and out of genuine history with little concern for the boundaries of space and time. Indeed, it is precisely at those moments when sacred and genuine history collide that religions are born.*

Reza Aslan<sup>87</sup>

*Religious practices aim to integrate all aspects of humans and are therefore more extensive than modern psychological treatments.*

Haraldur Erlendsson<sup>88</sup>

Public discourse on the integration of Muslims in Europe, Iceland included, seems focused mainly on the religious aspect of Islam. How accurate is it solely to rely on the religious side of these Europeans when addressing their current integration difficulties? How appropriate is it to use the term ‘Muslim’ inclusively, as if there is only one homogenous group of Muslims in Europe? Being a Muslim is just one identity of many because although religion does play a significant part in one’s identity, so does gender, class, ethnicity, and age, to name a few.

Islam is neither a particular comprehensive type of society nor a fragmented collection of religious customs. It is a tradition and something Muslims do, both explicitly and implicitly.<sup>89</sup> Islam is not a self-sustaining set of rules, void of influence from historical and social context. Muslims are living all over the world in various communities and various social contexts. Islam is as diverse as the people practicing it. The social expression of Islam is manifold due to different backgrounds and prerequisites to deal with the social environment that affects it. Islam is therefore shaped by historical, social, cultural, and political circumstances. This tremendous cultural complexity makes it

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<sup>87</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. xxiii.

<sup>88</sup> Haraldur Erlendsson, *Helgunar- og heilunarferli í dómsdagsmýtum Völuspár og rússneskra helgimynda*, unpublished, 2017, pg. 38.

<sup>89</sup> Talal Asad, *The idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, DC: Georgetown University, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986. pg. 14.

impossible to speak of a single Muslim community in Europe or declare homogeneity of European Muslims.<sup>90</sup>

It seems that Islamic diversity is not just about different religious expressions, emphases, and activities but about the power that decides which ideologies and institutions will advance at any given time. Asad<sup>91</sup> suggests that the structure of authority and power within Islam determines true Islamic practices, thus based on the authorization of Islamic discourse traditions. Starrett<sup>92</sup> supports this view and says that discussing what Islam is, is not so much about society reflecting the text, but rather who uses the text and how to empower a particular ideology. In other words, Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy are closely linked to power and, as such, intertwined with culture. Recent European history paints a very different picture of religion, and from the Enlightenment onward, the continent has moved towards secularism and secularization of society.

This interconnection of religion, culture, and power in Islam is what many Europeans struggle with the most and view as dated and undesirable. Here we have a typical dichotomization in identity construction with all the friction that comes with it. The prevailing secular liberalism of Europe aims to separate politics and religion. By separation of state and religion, authorities declare themselves to be neutral and non-rhetoric for the public sphere, and in contrast, religion is rhetoric and individualistic for the private sphere. This means that the public sphere stands for logic, transparency, neutrality, and influence, and most religious activities in the public sphere are thus undemocratic and even theocratic.<sup>93</sup> Religion is therefore placed outside the public domain. This secularistic approach to structuring society is one reason for political Islam in Europe, and one needs to keep in mind that political Islam does not necessarily mean Islamization of society or radical Islamism. However, the secular states of Europe consider political Islam to be a threat to modern scientific societies, a threat that has to be neutralized before religion takes over the public sphere.<sup>94</sup>

A way needs to be found to cultivate a peaceful, thriving society and at the same time guarantee absolute religious freedom and tolerance. For Muslims to thrive, the French

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<sup>90</sup> Grillo, "Islam and Transnationalism", pg. 864.

Morris, *Religion and anthropology*, pg. 77.

<sup>91</sup> Asad, *The idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, pg. 15.

<sup>92</sup> Gregory Starrett, "The Anthropology of Islam", *Anthropology of Religion*, editor Stephen D. Glazier, Westport: Praeger, 1997, pg. 279-303, here pg. 288.

<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Political Islam and foreign policy in Europe and the United States", *Foreign policy Analysis* 3/2007, pg. 345-367, here pg. 351-352.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavík*, pg. 22.

<sup>94</sup> Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear?" pg. 157.

Hurd, "Political Islam", pg. 352.

scholar Gilles Kepel<sup>95</sup> believes the separation of the secular and the religious to be an absolute priority and premise of their advance in European culture. Islam must make peace with modernization. The Sudanese law professor Ahmed An-Na'im<sup>96</sup> agrees with Kepel and says that to live as a free Muslim, according to his/her convictions, he/she needs a secular state that is neutral to faith and does not try or pretend to implement Islamic Sharia law. This perhaps is the main point of friction, two opposite perspectives on the place of religion in society and its role in politics.

Religion and state often seem inseparable in Islam, and there is little room for secularization, even less than within the other major world religions. It can be argued, since secularism began its invasion in the West, with the distancing of politics and religion, the two have come even closer together in the Islamic states of the Middle East.<sup>97</sup> This polarization has reached a certain point in Islam-European relations and has become the foundation for current identity construction based on demarcation. Such marginalization emphasizes 'us' vs. 'them' and creates active ethnic groups best seen in Muslim ghettos across Europe. Likewise, the nations of Europe become particularly ethnic in behavior towards non-Western immigrants.<sup>98</sup> This disappointing development leads to an even further social demarcation of Muslims in Europe.

Europe might want to keep religion hidden within the private spectrum, but Muslims are openly religious, and both want and need to find the protective provision within a pluralistic society for a religious lifestyle. This currently seems to be at a dead-end in Europe, and thus authorities are looking for a new pluralistic paradigm in cultural diversity management.

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<sup>95</sup> Kepel, *The war for Muslim minds: Islam and the West*, pg. 295.

<sup>96</sup> Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the secular state: Negotiating the future of Sharia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, pg. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How globalism and tribalism are reshaping the world*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1996, pg. 206.

Bernhard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pg. 135-136.

<sup>98</sup> Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear?" pg. 134-135, 128.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavík*, pg. 22-23.



## 4.1 Pluralism, Secularism and Diversity management

*To such people, it is inconceivable that Islam (usually labeled 'Other/Eastern') has any truths to offer that may be commensurable with Judaism and Christianity (considered 'Western'), much less with insights claimed by secular feminisms. Such views, however, ignore the scripturally linked nature and Middle Eastern origin of all three religions, hence the commonality of some of their truth claims. In positing a hyperseparation between Islam and the West, they also ignore that counterposing Islam to the West is misleading in that Islam is a way of life and not an 'imagined geography' to borrow Edward Said's (1979) rich phrase. ... Further, Islam not only exists within the West but also has helped to continue the West, as Said so compellingly demonstrated two decades ago.*

Asma Barlas<sup>99</sup>

Despite Covid-19, borders closing, and significant restrictions on international travel, it is a bit premature to announce the death of globalization and migration due to lack of mobility. The process is ongoing and likely only to accelerate, especially with the influx of climate change refugees. This inevitably continues to bring change that is not always easy or even welcome, as different cultural traits, multiple languages, diversity of faiths, and value systems come together. The force is on, and increasingly we will see ultra-diversified and complex societies. There is, therefore, no escaping from pluralism. Iceland is fast desquamating its homogenous skin, growing a new heterogeneous one, and pluralism in Icelandic society changes and matures parallelly.

As a societal concept, pluralism is rooted in political science. It refers to the political diversity within democratic parliament, where agreement is reached on relational values, rules, and applicable law, or unification on rules and regulations with the acceptance of diversity. Bassam Tibi says that the notion of political pluralism in immigration policy is the option of considering cultural, ethnic, and religious groups as politically diverse entities, united on mutual recognition and respect within the framework of certain values and laws.<sup>100</sup> He claims that multiculturalism in Europe has failed, as it breeds ethnicity of fear, and such kind of cultural relativism is best replaced with the proper implementation of democratic and political pluralism. He says it is the only way to resolve the great friction

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<sup>99</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, London: Saqi Books, 2019, pg. x-xi.

<sup>100</sup> Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear?", pg. 139-141.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur*, pg. 29.

of cultural diversity within society peacefully. This is a particularly interesting statement since most Europeans will most likely think of multiculturalism as a public policy implementation of pluralism. Herein lies one of the arguments against multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism tends to breed separation of diverse groups within society, and in the case of Muslims, this separation is almost exclusively built on their religious identity. This begs the question of other identity marks, such as gender, social class, age, legal situation, working condition, or the fact that personal identity is often related to interpersonal relationships with others.

There are at least three major pluralistic issues to be solved before we can expect it to serve the majority group in Iceland, Icelandic Muslims and other minority groups. There have been some discussions around those issues and great division even amidst the majority group. First, it is the issue of *secularism*. Not all majority group Icelanders consider themselves religious, nor are they all members of religious organizations, but still, a good majority are officially part of organized religion to one degree or another. Within this group, we have some that are people of faith, others not so much, but all appreciate the Christian cultural heritage that has evolved in the land, its roots, and values that have determined and colored Icelandic society for centuries. They have been raised with these values, and the national flag is a reminder, on top of different rituals and potent symbolism. It is part of their identity.

True democracy reflects the will of society, and therefore the Icelandic national and local governments should not ignore the significant influence of religion in society by attempting to implement secularism. The cultural majority fears this identity lost. However, modern democracies do not need to be constructed on the moral foundation of secularism; many are not. Does that mean that Iceland should not be a secularized society? No, but there is a difference. In reference to Protestant theologian Harvey Cox, Aslan<sup>101</sup> puts it this way:

*“Secularization is the process by which certain responsibilities pass from ecclesiastical to political authorities, whereas secularism is an ideology based on the eradication of religion from public life. Secularization implies a historical evolution in which society gradually frees itself from religious control and closed metaphysical worldviews. Secularism is itself a closed metaphysical worldview that functions very much like a new religion.”*

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<sup>101</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 269-270.

Aslan adds: “*It is pluralism, not secularism, that defines democracy. A democratic state can be established upon any normative moral framework as long as pluralism remains the source of its legitimacy.*”

Christianity, or at least Christian ethics and references, is such a framework for Iceland, but both Muslims and followers of other religions can thrive and prosper within such a pluralistic democracy. Pluralism means religious tolerance, but not without certain boundaries regarding public morality and the law of the land. This applies to both minority groups and the cultural majority group.

The second issue at stake is *relativism* and the importance of clarifying the distinction between cultural pluralism and cultural relativism, which happens to be finding fertile soil of fear in some Icelanders, maybe understandably so. It might seem evident that relativism would divide society and dissolve cohesiveness. What is the distinction? Isaiah Berlin<sup>102</sup> says that while relativism flattens our capacity to make value judgments, pluralism retains this capacity but anchors it in our ability for imagination and empathy for people different from us. Berlin elaborates:

*“Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight understand the value, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find these values unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently, they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one’s own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life by the realization of which men could be fulfilled.”*

This takes pluralism beyond being a governmental policy only and helps us see the world and others from different perspectives. It is the humanistic approach. This kind of pluralism can create a social web of intercultural everyday life.

The third issue is *White Fragility*. It can be a factor in everyday intercultural life and needs to be addressed. White Fragility is a state in which any amount of racial nuance and stress becomes intolerable, thus causing emotional defensive reactions and even actions.

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<sup>102</sup> Berlin Isaiah, *The crooked timber of humanity: Chapters in the history of ideas*, London: Fontana Press, 1991, pg. 10.

This takes place in a white insulated environment of racial protection and white expectations for racial comfort, and it functions to reinstate white racial equilibrium.<sup>103</sup>

If pluralism is here to stay, diversity management is unavoidable; one cannot have one without the other. There exist at least five identifiable paradigms for diversity management<sup>104</sup> a) *Paradigm of diversity*. The premise is that the nation is comprised of individuals and ethnocultural groups on equal footing and protected by the same law of the land. There is no special recognition of the former existing majority culture or minorities per se. Here we can place multiculturalism b) *Paradigm of homogeneity*. This paradigm fundamentally emphasizes ethnocultural sameness in public life and even in private life to a certain degree. Assimilation is best placed within this paradigm c) *Paradigm of bi-or multipolarity*. Society is made up of two or more national groups, possibly even acknowledged as such and granted permanent status by the law d) *Paradigm of duality*. Diversity is managed as a relationship between the cultural majority group, or the *foundational* group, and all minority groups, both recent and distant. This is where we would place interculturalism e) *Paradigm of mixity*. Based on the premise that ethnocultural diversity will progressively be reduced through intense cultural exchange and miscegenation, a new and superior culture will eventually be created.

Diversity management is no simple task and still a pressing issue in Europe, decades into assimilation and multicultural implementation. Multiculturalism is based on majority-minority relations, with imposed or negotiated integration. Some scholars advocate integration in the spirit of pluralism, a specific form of multiculturalism accepting transnationalism and granting leeway for immigrants to maintain and re-create their cultural identity in a new cultural context.<sup>105</sup> Even so, multiculturalism seems to be up against the wall in Europe. It is argued that it has failed to integrate properly and unify.

In ‘*Interculturalism and multiculturalism: similarities and differences*’ published in 2013 by the Council of Europe,<sup>106</sup> one can read that multiculturalism is entirely out of step with the new world order of population fluidity, transnationalism, and diaspora influences. Even though most Europeans increasingly participate in the globalization of cross-cultural creations on all levels, they simultaneously fret it could destroy their collective identity.

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<sup>103</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility”, *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3:3/2011, pg. 54-70, here pg. 54-55.

<sup>104</sup> Gérard Bouchard, “Quebec Interculturalism and Canadian Multiculturalism”, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 77-103, here pg. 93.

<sup>105</sup> Cesari, “Islam in the West: From immigration to global Islam”, pg. 156-158.

<sup>106</sup> Ted Cattle, “Interculturalism as a narrative for era of globalization and super-diversity”, *Interculturalism and multiculturalism: similarities and differences*, editor Martyn Barret, Council of Europe, 2013, pg. 70, 48.

This again emphasizes the need for good cultural diversity management to keep national cohesiveness, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. The Council of Europe concludes that the philosophy and implementation of multiculturalism no longer carry the necessary means to guide cultural diversity management in Europe, at least not in its current form.

Interculturalism and dialogue are now seen as the way forward in Europe to manage the increasing cultural diversity of the continent effectively. Integration of immigrants is a two-way street, and before we explore the possible effect of interculturalism on religious diversity in Iceland, we should look at Icelandic identity construction and the effect of current cultural change.

## 5 Icelandic Identity Construction

Icelandic Saga scholars, some physical anthropologists, and other scientists have argued in favor of the pure, unique homo islandicus, a special breed of people and remnants of the pure unadulterated human race, in need of protection from contamination. The indication is that ancient Icelanders understood their unique heritage and strived to guard and protect it by preventing blood mixing with lower-class people.<sup>107</sup>

As Norwegians and Brits settling in Iceland, a new identity was a slow train coming for the people in the new land, the identity as free and independent people, the keepers of the pure Viking blood. Kirsten Hastrup<sup>108</sup> suggests that the need for a stronger social identity amongst the Icelanders influenced the twelfth and thirteenth-century writers in Iceland to recreate the past in their literature, writing Iceland as the free and independent state. A pure fabrication Hastrup says. This point will not be argued here and now, but moving closer in time, the spokespeople for the Icelandic independence movement used the literary heritage of the Sagas to legitimize the rights for an independent Iceland, free from Danish rule.<sup>109</sup>

The acclaimed purity and uniqueness did not keep the Icelanders on top of the list of fast-developing and prosperous nations, and we can say for certain that the pure Viking stock has not always had it so great in the land of fire and ice. “A more desolate-looking place I had rarely if ever seen,” said John Ross Browne<sup>110</sup> about Reykjavik, the capital, as he describes the harsh weather and environment, the hard work and struggle of the common Icelander.

History books tell of the first settlers from Scandinavia and the British Isles to have landed on Iceland’s shores around 874, but there seems to be sufficient evidence pointing to an even earlier settlement of Irish people.<sup>111</sup> Some of the Norsemen, arriving in 874 and the following years, kept journeying west for further discovery. These people were not Icelanders at that time. There was no Icelandic ethnicity in existence, and there was, of course, no Icelandic culture or identity. If ethnic groups do form around collective culture, and cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, intellectual heritage of

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<sup>107</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 137, 125.

<sup>108</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, “Defining society: The Icelandic Free State between two worlds”, *Scandinavian Studies*, 56:3/1984, pg. 235-255, here pg. 250.

<sup>109</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 122.

<sup>110</sup> John Ross Browne, *The land of Thor*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1867, pg. 431.

<sup>111</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 121.

traditions, beliefs, values, criteria, choice, and cooperation, this group of people was primarily Norse, with some feminine Irish mix.<sup>112</sup>

Gísli Pálsson and Sigurður Örn Guðbjörnsson<sup>113</sup> suggest that Althing, or Parliament that was established by the settlers in 930, helped in creating a new ethnic identity. During the Commonwealth era that followed, the early settlers still considered themselves to be Norse, and it was only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that linguistic evidence can be found pointing to the new identity of the Icelandic ethnic group. Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson continue and say that at the end of the era in 1262, when Iceland was subjected to a very long Scandinavian rule, the new rulers expected the settlers in Iceland to shoulder their responsibility as a Norse civilization. Despite this, some sense of separate Icelandic identity did form, even as early as medieval times, but keeping it strong and growing under these circumstances was most likely not an easy task.

The ideas and images of the north in Europe were of rough places with uncivilized inhabitants during the fourteen hundred and even into the nineteenth century.<sup>114</sup> A nationalist movement was formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as Icelanders wanted to break free from foreign rule and come into their own as a nation amongst nations. The battle for recognition was in full force. A significant factor in this fight for freedom was the crystallization of the Icelandic white cultural heritage, or as some might argue its creation.

## 5.1 New Identity

When examining symbols in society, Victor Turner<sup>115</sup> points out that it is not enough to look at the use of symbols at any given time, but one must know what each symbol stands for. He speaks of dominant symbols that can mean many different things depending on the interpreter but are yet unifying at the same time. Turner says these symbols carry two primary meanings, an ideological one that relates to society's political and social structure and a sensory one, an emotional symbol that relates to the experience of individuals. People are not all the same, Turner says, so the symbols need to speak with many different voices, sounding as one.

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<sup>112</sup> Machery and Faucher, "Social construction and the concept of race", pg. 1208-1219.

<sup>113</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, "Make no bones about it", pg. 122-123.

<sup>114</sup> Loftsdóttir, "Belonging and the Icelandic others", pg. 59.

<sup>115</sup> Victor Turner, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967, pg. 33-39.

The Icelandic patriots for independence had not read Turner, but they were nevertheless able to find the symbol that spoke with one voice, appealed to people's emotions, and united a scattered herd. Like Romantic Era nationalists, they developed new myths and symbols, the mother of them all, 'Fjallkonan,' or the Mountain Woman. The Mountain Woman became one of the strongest unifying symbols of the nation, a personification of liberty, equality, and fraternity, not unlike Marianne of France since the French Revolution and later the female imagery of Egyptian nationalism as put forth in Beth Baron's book 'Egypt as a Woman.'<sup>116</sup>

The Mountain Woman symbolizes beauty, dignity, and virtue in the nation. She represents everything Icelandic, ancient, and unique, the cultural heritage, religion, and values. The white bloodline of mainly Nordic and Irish people became her children, as she led them away from the heathen Nordic gods into the arms of the Christian god. She guided them through the turmoil and hardship of the Middle Ages and Catholicism to Lutheranism to become the national state church. She represents the land, their land, she is their mother, and they love and respect her. She has bred them, reared them, cared for all their needs, taught them everything they know, and made them who they are. She guards the purity of the Icelandic heart language, basic values, social structure, and cultural heritage - she is their identity.

The nationalists succeeded once more in linking their fight for freedom with prevailing notions of natural selection and the influence of mother earth on creating nations. The Mountain Woman is symbolic of their independence, their authority to govern without the intervention of other nations, that responsibility is now in the hands of her offspring.<sup>117</sup> Mayor Jón Gnarr, as one of her ruling sons, set a new tone to this symphony when calling her imperfect, a drunk and abusive mother, but even so, he loves her unconditionally. Then again, perhaps this is only a sign of the times and supports what historian Fustel de Coulanges said, that neither race nor language (and presumably not a unified notion of a Mountain Woman) is needed to create a national unity; people find it in their hearts that they belong to the same nation.<sup>118</sup> Acceptance of national identity revolves around believing in the ideas and ideology of the nationalists. For these ideas to come to fruition, social influencers must decide and form the direction, draw the lines, and

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<sup>116</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, University of California Press Books, 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, "The Mountain Woman and the presidency", *Images of contemporary Iceland: Everyday lives and global contexts*, editors Gísli Pálsson and E. Paul Durrenberger, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996, pg. 106-125.

Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, pg. 15-45.

<sup>118</sup> Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, pg. 23.



paint the picture. Then, to become a governmental tool for the future, public approval is needed.<sup>119</sup>

Icelandic society and culture continued to transform following the Second World War and the Cold War, redefining its place and role in the community of nations, with the modernization of the economy and society as a whole, becoming more Americanized than European.<sup>120</sup> A big part of the Icelandic identity seemed to be the need and desire to belong to the superior white population of the global community, and this can be seen even in recent years, portraying Icelanders as unique and different.<sup>121</sup>

How does the past, the Icelandic culture and mentality developed over the centuries, the idea of white supremacy, struggle and poverty, recognition as an independent state, and relatively newfound prosperity, how does all this come into play as present-day Icelanders live out their daily life in a world of mobility and neoliberalism? Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson<sup>122</sup> state that homo islandicus was brought back to life at the beginning of the new millennium through deCode national biobank and the ‘successful brilliancy’ of the islandicus bankers. During that time, at least, there was no shortage of phrases like “we are the best” and “Iceland is the best country in the world,” even the first lady claimed that Iceland was “stórasta land í heimi” or the biggest country of the world. She was hardly referring to landmass but rather to the embracive size of the heart of its people.

Now, these same hearts need to remain embracive and caring. They need to open up their arms to the new Icelanders landing on their shores, and so far, so mostly good. We can look to the symbolism of the Mountain Woman to see the change. In every town of the land on Independence Day in June each year, she shows up dressed in her majestic ‘Skautbúning’ (women’s traditional national costume) reciting a poem. She always reflects the white, pure bloodline of the past, that is, up until 2002, when it all changed. From 2002 on, women of color, new Icelanders of various descent, have stood on the festivity platforms of different towns as the Mountain Woman. The mother continues to lead the way.

## **5.2 Current Culture flow and Change**

The immense change and turmoil of the last few decades, globalism, neoliberalism, the rise and fall of financial institutions have directly affected Icelandic politics and culture,

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<sup>119</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 126.

<sup>120</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 123.

<sup>121</sup> Loftsdóttir, “Belonging and the Icelandic other”, pg. 67.

<sup>122</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 138.

moving it eastward again,<sup>123</sup> turning the eyes back to the Nordic and European heritage. The global epidemic of Covid19 has just reinforced this decision, as the nation looks to and identifies more with other Scandinavian nations while going through the epidemic.

How are the relatively easily influenced cultural heritage of the 368.792 Icelandic citizens<sup>124</sup> to fare in the face of rapid change and global culture flow, as increasing numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants become the new settlers of the land?

Accepting and welcoming the ‘white, not so different’ people into the land does not seem to be too difficult, as their cultural elements are not too different from ‘us’; Icelanders belong to the white Europeans, after all.<sup>125</sup> When the ‘other’ cultural heritage seems to bear little or no resemblance to ‘our’ culture, we struggle. Such is currently the effect of the growing community of Muslims in Iceland. Elections of May 2014 for Reykjavik City Council called for fierce exchange of comments regarding the allocated lot where a Muslim community in Iceland is planning the first mosque construction in the country. One of the candidates running for office suggested that she might reverse the former decision of granting the lot to the Muslims if elected. This reaction exhibits fear of the unknown, fear of change, the fear of cultural traits transformation, a cultural acquisition by the up to now mostly invisible and foreign Islam. It is the fear of drastic change to the cultural foundation with the consequent loss of present identity. It shows that the importance of identity reaches critical heights when it seems threatened. The boundaries around ‘us’ are dependent on outside pressure and are essential for maintaining the social structure and as a tool in political power plays.<sup>126</sup>

People learn from others how to deal with real or imaginary threats, which means that we as cultural beings base our conclusions on what is customary. We feel threatened by ‘others’ when there is too much cultural deviation, and such extended threat can turn into xenophobia.<sup>127</sup> It is our culture that determines our actions. We belong to and rest our identity in a social system of customs and values, from where we act and interact with the ‘others’ that live by different cultural guidelines. Our identity changes, grows, and hopefully matures over time, but if the transformation is too rapid or too radical, we cease

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<sup>123</sup> Pálsson and Guðbjörnsson, “Make no bones about it”, pg. 123.

<sup>124</sup> *Mannfjöldi*, Statistics Iceland, 22. March 2021, retrieved 30. March 2021, from <https://www.hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldi/mannfjoldinn-1-januar-2021/>.

<sup>125</sup> Loftsdóttir, “Belonging and the Icelandic others”, pg. 61.

<sup>126</sup> Eriksen, *Ethnicity and nationalism*, pg. 92.

<sup>127</sup> Strumska-Cylwik, “Other/Otherness in multicultural world”, pg. 38.

to be who we are and become someone else.<sup>128</sup> So change is okay for most people if it does not cause them to lose their identity.

Of all immigrant friction in Iceland, the Muslim one seems to be the touchiest and the most visible. This is not to say that Iceland is facing such stir as the neighboring nations are, not at all. Despite occasional racist remarks and attitudes, the relation is primarily peaceful, and the goal is to keep it that way. However, ‘the times are a-changin’ once more. In the elections to the Swedish parliament in the fall of 2014, an ultra-rightwing political party, ‘Sweden Democrats,’ gained many votes and became the third-largest political party in Sweden. Sweden is one of Iceland’s big brothers, a guiding light of Scandinavian liberal ideology. Their victory is directly related to the threat that some Swedes feel from the cultural changes taking place in their land, real or imagined. These ultra-rightwing political parties also exist in Norway and Denmark, other siblings of Iceland, catering to fear of cultural change. They fuel the radical extremist groups, such as neo-Nazi groups, and the danger is that racism will spread. There is a real possibility that such a political party will also surface in Iceland in the future, as Icelandic cultural trends tend to follow those of other Nordic countries ten to fifteen years later, even sooner nowadays. Understanding Islam as a religion, Muslims as religious people, and excellent cultural diversity management could drastically reduce the perceived ‘need’ for such a party in Iceland.

In the light of growing support for xenophobic political parties on the European continent and the financial crisis causing cutbacks on the immigration budget, diversity management has become a hot and challenging topic. Multiple identities and transnational practices are fast becoming the norm in Iceland, as in the rest of Europe, which could lead to change in what drives cultural diversity management. Instead of origin of birth or a verified nationality by passport, it could be gender, social class, working- and legal conditions, or other identities. In the last two to three decades, Iceland has adhered to multiculturalism when integrating immigrants into society, meaning that differences should be respected and their cultural practices, religion, and language recognized. Equal rights and equal distribution of resources are a part of multicultural policymaking. A recent survey in Iceland shows that 57% of Icelanders believe that racism is relatively widespread in the population, and 10% say it is prevalent.<sup>129</sup> The survey does not show if it is the origin of birth or skin color that triggers racism. How can racism and Muslim demarcation

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<sup>128</sup> Anna Maria Cossiga, “Immigrants or planters? The social-cultural matrix of the US economic performance”, *The Journal of European Economic History*, 37:2/2008, pg. 473-493, here pg. 491, retrieved 12. January 2016, from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/89064642?accountid=135943>.

<sup>129</sup> Aðalheiður Ásmundsdóttir, *Frettabladid.is*, 23. June 2020, retrieved 23. June 2020, from <https://www.frettabladid.is/frettir/yfir-helmingur-telur-fordoma-algenga-islandi/>.

be prevented or at least minimized in Iceland on the way to a peaceful, cohesive society that eventually will emerge as one collective culture for all future Icelanders?

Communication through humanistic dialogue and implementation of intercultural policy are necessary steps towards that goal. The Latin word ‘*communico*’ means communication or conversation and making something in common, with reference, to the ‘word’ community. In other words, by communicating, we form a community or relationship with others; we create community. Forming a community this way can call for the need to analyze the past and look to the future. Our communication or dialogue creates our future together and forms our collective community.<sup>130</sup> Thus, in making platforms to communicate with refugees, immigrants, and other culturally diverse groups, we create our cultural reality.

Nothing is simple and straightforward about cultural identity and belonging, emigration, racism, and current world affairs. Cultural identity construction with diverse building material does not come about on its own, and there is no waiting for things to pan out. Building and keeping a peaceful intercultural society requires a combined effort of politicians, scholars, schools, media, and the public.<sup>131</sup> Only then will the nation grow and mature in cultural unity. Continual research, constant involvement, and political policy to provide the platform must establish meaning to such events and cultural reality. The fluidity of cultures in a growing interconnectedness of the world calls for tools to develop cultural literacy and navigational skills, helping people to endorse and manage the change.

Cultural currents are just like water currents; as they meet, they can cause turbulence with associated conflicts, but cultural development will continue as culture is shaped, reshaped, created, and recreated by people. Because of the minority rights-based focus of multiculturalism, the majority group often fears losing their identity due to cultural protection tendencies of the minority culture. The majority group senses that there exists a pro-minority bias in society that ignores the fears of the majority group; thus, a growing intolerance is detected both towards certain minority groups and against the liberals that push for multiculturalism.<sup>132</sup> Policy for diversity management can never be one-sided; it has to work with society as a whole. Interculturalism could, for many reasons, be well suited for Icelandic diversity management, major reasons being its approach to religion,

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<sup>130</sup> Strumska-Cylwik, “Other/Otherness in multicultural world”, pg. 39.

Lárusson, *Frá Mekka til Reykjavíkur*, pg. 32.

<sup>131</sup> Zapata-Barrero, “Interculturalism in post-multicultural debate”, pg. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Parekh, “Afterword: Multiculturalism and Interculturalism-A Critical Dialogue”, pg. 274.

religious education, dialogue, and attention to the majority group. Before examining such a possibility, let us look at Icelandic reality as it presents itself in recent surveys.

### 5.3 Icelandic Reality in Numbers

The School of Social Sciences, University of Iceland, did a comprehensive survey on behalf of the Ministry of Welfare in September of 2019.<sup>133</sup> The survey aimed to show the general public's mindset in Iceland towards immigrants and multicultural society. There are mainly two tables in this survey that are of interest for the subject at hand, Table 15, here Table 5.1 and Table 7, here Table 5.2.

**Table 5.1**

**When determining whether people outside of the EEC should be granted residency in Iceland, that they be Christians?**

	Numbers	Percentage
Very important	65	7,50%
Relatively important	102	11,90%
Not important	268	31,10%
Definitely not important	426	49,50%
Total	861	100,0%
Number of participants	861	91%
Don't know	41	4,30%
Don't want to answer	44	4,70%
Total	946	100,0%

Table 5.1 shows us that 80,6% do not think it must be of Christian origin when it comes to immigrants' particular religion or faith. These numbers are promising for the integration process of Muslims and followers of other religions or no religion.

<sup>133</sup> *Könnun á viðhorfum almennings til innflytjenda og fjölmenningsamfélagsins*, School of Social Sciences, University of Iceland., September 2019, pg. 12, pg. 20, retrieved 3. April 2021, from [https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Felagsmalaraduneytid/Viðhorf\\_%20til\\_innflytjenda\\_september\\_2019.pdf](https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Felagsmalaraduneytid/Viðhorf_%20til_innflytjenda_september_2019.pdf).

**Table 5.2****Overall, do you think immigrants enrich or undermine Icelandic culture?**

	Numbers	Percentage
10 - Enrich in a major way	102	11,6%
9	73	8,3%
8	146	16,6%
7	155	17,6%
6	86	9,8%
5	125	14,2%
4	61	6,9%
3	50	5,7%
2	41	4,7%
1	15	1,7%
0 - Seriously undermine	26	2,9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>880</b>	<b>100,0%</b>
Number of participants	880	93,0%
Don't know	47	5,0%
Don't want to answer	19	2,0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>100,0%</b>

Judging by the numbers in Table 5.2, a good majority, or 63,9%, think immigrants will partially or greatly contribute and enrich Icelandic cultural life. Another 14,2% is neutral in their views of the matter and brings positives and neutral to 78,1%. These numbers are encouraging when Iceland looks to recreate its cultural life and include immigrants in its national identity.

## 6 Iceland and Interculturalism

*Not all intergroup contact reduces prejudice. Some situations engender enhanced prejudice. Such negative intergroup contact has received less research attention...*

*Negative contact typically occurs in situations where the participants feel threatened and did not choose to have contact. These situations frequently occur in work environments where intergroup competition exists as well as in situations involving intergroup conflict.*

Pettigrew<sup>134</sup>

The Council of Europe 2008 advocates interculturalism in replacing multiculturalism as the leading diversity management approach in Europe. The focus is desegregation, integration, social inclusion and cohesion, interaction, interconnectedness, intercultural dialogue, and exchange.

*Intercultural dialogue entails a reflexive disposition, in which one can see oneself from the perspective of others. On the foundation of the values of the Council of Europe, this requires a democratic architecture characterized by the respect of the individual as a human being, reciprocal recognition (in which this status of equal worth is recognized by all), and impartial treatment (where all claims arising are subject to rules that all can share)...*

*...This demarcates the intercultural approach more clearly from preceding models. Unlike assimilation, it recognizes that public authorities must be impartial, rather than accepting a majority ethos only, if communalist tensions are to be avoided. Unlike multiculturalism, however, it vindicates a common core which leaves no room for moral relativism. Unlike both, it recognizes a key role for the associational sphere of civic society where, premised on reciprocal recognition; intercultural dialogue can resolve the problems of daily life in a way that governments alone cannot. - COE 2008 White Paper<sup>135</sup>*

In the 2009 UNESCO World Report, titled “*Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*,” the nations of the world are encouraged to implement

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<sup>134</sup> Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood, and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, “A Plural Century: Situating Interculturalism and Multiculturalism”, *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 1-26, here pg. 13.

<sup>135</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, *Living together as Equals in Dignity*, pg. 20.

intercultural policies as their tool for diversity management,<sup>136</sup> and in 2015 the COE published a recommendation on intercultural integration to the ‘intercultural cities’ of member states.<sup>137</sup> Diversity management seems to be moving towards intercultural integration and dialogue.

What is interculturalism, and how does it differ from multiculturalism in implementation? Gérard Bouchard<sup>138</sup> proclaims that the two approaches operate on fundamentally different paradigms, as seen in chapter 4.1; though this may undoubtedly be refuted, it is an excellent place to start. His thoughts are that multiculturalism operates on a *diversity paradigm*, where all individuals and groups have equal status under the same laws. Under this paradigm, there is no recognition of a majority culture. On the other hand, interculturalism operates on a *duality paradigm*, where diversity is understood and managed as a relationship between minorities and the cultural majority that could be described as a foundational culture. Interculturalism is not brand new, with never before heard concepts or thoughts. It is not constructed in a void but builds on the history and processes of former diversity management approaches. Therefore, it is the outcome of various factors reframing the diversity policy debate over time and is a continuance to former implemented migration policies.<sup>139</sup>

While the multiculturalist approach is built on protecting the cultural rights of minority groups and often so without any thought of interactions between groups, the goal of interculturalism is to search out the interpersonal relations and make them visible in the public sphere and work together for the common good of society. Interculturalism accepts the principles of equal rights and values and works towards a policy that promotes interaction, collaboration, and exchange between people of different ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. The emphasis of interculturalism is the commonality of people with different backgrounds, what can be shared, recognized, and respected, rather than what is different.<sup>140</sup> That is to say, interculturalism is not constructed around groups or individuals but is a strategy to manage the interaction between the culturally different individuals and groups in a community. The focus is not the difference but the common

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<sup>136</sup> UNESCO World Report, *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, 2009, retrieved 25. January 2021, from <https://www.slideshare.net/david20/unesco-world-report-investing-in-cultural-diversity-and-intercultural-dialogue>.

<sup>137</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, “Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States in intercultural integration”, *Council of Europe Portal*, 21. January 2015, retrieved 13. December 2020, from [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805c471f](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805c471f).

<sup>138</sup> Gérard Bouchard, “What is Interculturalism”, *McGill Law Journal* 56:2/2011, pg. 435-468, here pg. 441-442.

<sup>139</sup> Zapata-Barrero, “Interculturalism in post-multicultural debate”, pg. 1-2.

<sup>140</sup> Zapata-Barrero, “Theorizing Intercultural Citizenship”, pg. 55-56.



humanity of all. The basis for interculturalism is thus the coming together of people in various activities, people with different cultural and national identity, from both majority and minority groups. It is built on the belief that if human beings are equally treated with fairness and respect as they come together in sharing, conversing, and dialoguing, they can build their future together in solidarity and a growing sense of belonging.

Zapata-Barrero<sup>141</sup> describes interculturalism as a technique for bridging differences, bonding, and promoting social capital in public spheres of everyday life, such as neighborhoods, schools, playgrounds, libraries, marketplaces, and all other cultural public spaces. Thus, finding the shared contact zones of people from different backgrounds, who share certain commonalities, and facilitate relations between them, will build bridges or create physical contact between different individuals and groups. The intercultural approach to interaction is believed to diminish some of the arguments in the racist and xenophobic political discourse of our time. On the other hand, multicultural citizenship of rights-based concern is claimed to foster marginalization, segregation, and cultural isolation of minority cultures from mainstream society. It has been suggested that citizens within state multiculturalism, with emphasis on difference, relate to the state differently and have different forms of membership.<sup>142</sup> Thus, it can be argued that multicultural theory embodies an element of racial purity. For intercultural interactive bridge building to succeed, diversity needs to be represented in governance, public administration, and the public context in general.

The aim is to encourage interpersonal contact, break down stereotypical viewpoints, ignorance, and prejudices towards the other. Thus, through communicative dialogue, the hope is to build mutual understanding, trust, and solidarity amongst the different cultural groups to increase tolerance and diminish cultural conflict. Social mix and shared practices for the majority and minority groups and open communication are therefore keys to a successful implementation of interculturalism.

A major argument for interculturalism over multiculturalism is the idea of anti-integrational multicultural theory or protecting the minority culture even at the cost of majority cultural heritage. In social media and hot tub conversations at the swimming pools of Iceland, one can pick up this sentiment of being required to accommodate and change for the benefit of minority groups, especially Muslims, who in return, by the way, ‘hardly even have to integrate or respect Icelandic heritage.’ It is not the case, but it mirrors

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<sup>141</sup> Zapata-Barrero, “Theorizing Intercultural Citizenship”, pg. 57.

<sup>142</sup> Will Kymlicka, “Multicultural States and Intercultural Citizens”, *Theory and research in Education* 1:2/2003, 147-169, here pg. 153.

the fear of division and loss of identity. The intercultural theory addresses this issue by recognizing the legitimacy of the majority as the foundational culture, and thus its right to perpetuate it. It is not assimilatory but integrational. It also reduces the hegemonic attitude towards minorities, who in return are expected to embrace the natural, cultural bias that might be there due to the particular history and heritage of the community that they are now a part of.<sup>143</sup>

Thus, one of the strengths of interculturalism is the appreciation and centering of the foundational culture, a real issue facing Iceland and many other European nations. The process is not to create a common relativistic culture but to grow and mature the majority culture and all the new cultural traits flooding the land. Common language is a significant part of this cultural process and vital for any society looking for intercultural communication, solidarity, cohesiveness, social neutrality, and equal opportunities for its people. Without a shared language, there is no conversation, no dialogue, and difficulties with work for immigrants; in fact, there is very little life together. A common language is required for unified social cohesion. However, a common language is a worthy study on its own and not the main issue at hand; religion is. It is time to have a look at Quebec, Canada.

## 6.1 A lesson from Quebec

Amid Canadian multiculturalism, we find Quebec's model of cultural pluralism, their version of interculturalism. Charles Taylor<sup>144</sup> suggests that this model could be best suited for many European nations, whose majority is concerned with preserving their historical identities and culture. The contrast is clear he says:

*The 'multi' story decenters the traditional ethno-historical identity and refuses to put any other in its place. All such identities coexist in the society, but none is officialized. The 'inter' story starts from the reigning historical identity but sees it evolving in a process in which all citizens, of whatever identity, have a voice and no-one's input has a privileged status.*

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<sup>143</sup> Alain-G. Gagnon and Raffael Iacovino, "Interculturalism and Multiculturalism: Similarities and Differences", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 104-132, here pg. 127, 112. Bouchard, "Quebec Interculturalism and Canadian Multiculturalism", pg. 83.

<sup>144</sup> Geoffrey Brahm Levey, "Diversity, Duality and Time", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 201-224, here pg. 209.

Charles Taylor, "Interculturalism or multiculturalism?", *Journals.sagepub.com*, May 2012, retrieved 5. February 2021, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453711435656>.

Being a diversity management tool and a pluralistic incarnation, Gérard Bouchard<sup>145</sup> points to the fact that interculturalism in Quebec accordingly promotes certain directive cultural values: a) protection of civil rights and the practice of reasonable accommodations b) fluid minority cultures so that their members can choose and negotiate their identity and belonging c) free expression of religion in the public sphere, including the rights for state employees to wear religious signs or symbols d) the necessity of various forms of minorities support, for example, the teaching of their language so that members can perpetuate their culture, if they so desire e) construction of national memory that reflects the diversity of the whole society f) formation of national identity as a work in progress feeding on both majority and minority cultures.

The model emphasizes the integration of newcomers as a two-way reciprocal process. It calls for joint responsibility of the majority and the minority groups in making sure that: a) immigrants are politically, socially, and economically included, especially in the job market b) immigrants are provided with the means to learn the public language and to embrace the basic values of the host society as stated in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, such as civic and social equality, including gender equality, democracy, freedom of speech, social justice, and non-violence. The model also is true to interculturalism at the micro-level, encouraging interculturality, facilitating integrative interactions to activate diversity as a resource, foster mutual trust, and fight stereotypes, racism, exclusion, and discrimination. The aspiration of intercultural achievements in Quebec calls for collective responsibility, and so it is.

Interculturalism requires cultural literacy competencies, and such training is best placed within the educational system. Quebec introduced its ethics and religious culture (ERC) program in 2008 to achieve competency in cultural dialogue and religious and moral literacy. All primary and secondary schools adhere to the program. The program emphasizes preserving the historic foundational culture, and Bouchard<sup>146</sup> speaks of majority precedence. Such ad hoc majority precedence is based on civilization, history institutions, and policy. Speaking of language and religion, Bouchard gives examples of what he calls legitimate applications and abusive extensions in Quebec (Table 6.1).

It seems that religion is the most controversial subject in diversity management, and Quebec teaches one way to approach it, giving hope for relatively calm integration of minority religions within Iceland.

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<sup>145</sup> Bouchard, "Quebec Interculturalism and Canadian Multiculturalism", pg. 77-79.

<sup>146</sup> Bouchard, "What is Interculturalism", pg. 435-468.  
Levey, "Diversity, Duality and Time", pg. 212-214.

**Table 6.1 – Gérard Bouchard on ad hoc precedence (from Bouchard 2011)<sup>147</sup>**

Legitimate applications

Abusive extensions

The institution of French as the common public language	Keeping a cross on the wall of the National Assembly and in public courtrooms.
Allocating a prominent place to the teaching of the francophone past in history courses, or in other words, a national memory that is inclusive but gives predominance to the majority	The recitation of prayers at municipal council meetings.
The current priority position given to the presentation of Christian religions in the new course on ethics and religious culture.	The funding of chaplain or Catholic pastoral care positions in public hospitals with state funds, to the exclusion of other religions.
The official burials of heads of state in Catholic churches.	The general prohibition against wearing religious signs for all employees in the public and semi-public sectors.
Keeping the cross on the Quebec flag (which has already been challenged).	The reference to the supremacy of God in the preamble of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
Laying Christmas decorations in public squares or buildings.	Including articles or clauses in a charter that establish a formal hierarchy between the cultural majority and minorities.
The sounding of bells in Catholic churches at various moments throughout the day.	The prohibition against wearing a burka in streets and public places (except for security or other compelling reasons).

Religion, different religious and faith traditions have affected human history, past, and present. Religious crayons color cultural canvases, and there is no indication of it stopping any time soon. As part of the school’s curriculum, religious education teaches about the influence of various religions on humanity and cultural evolution. This course of action is pretty much uncontroversial in Iceland. The 2008 abortion of religious instruction in Icelandic schools is not as widely accepted as parliament voted against the teaching of Christianity in the schools. It was done in the spirit of multiculturalism. How could the intercultural majority precedence possibly affect this situation and help create a respectful and peaceful way ahead, as Iceland gradually recreates its culture?

There is little doubt that some secularists would not mind seeing Iceland de-Christianized, but such was never the aim of multiculturalism in Europe, nor is it the desire of Muslims or followers of other religions. The evidence in Europe points in a very

<sup>147</sup> Levey, “Diversity, Duality and Time“, pg. 214.

different direction.<sup>148</sup> Religious minorities and especially Muslims in Britain, do not want the Christian faith out of the way, they do not want it out of the public sphere, but they want to add the other faiths. An application would mean that while guarding the existing national culture, the new faiths are adapted inclusively for current and future cultural development. It is not the question of abandoning Christian faith and values to accommodate others but adding the others to the existing cultural creation. In this light, the 2008 curriculum change in Iceland is a political miscalculation causing an unnecessary and divisive disturbance. In all fairness, the implementation of Icelandic multiculturalism probably called for it. Now, on the other hand, when the whole of Europe is calling for multiculturalism to be replaced by interculturalism, the Icelandic government and municipalities councils need to research, reconsider, and rewrite their diversity management policy.

Scholars, suggesting Iceland keeps Christianity within the school's curriculum and religious education, base it on the majority precedence and preservation of cultural heritage. Gunnar J. Gunnarsson<sup>149</sup> mentions five major reasons why this is important: a) *Christianity and current social construction*, b) *Christianity and its cultural influence*, c) *Christianity, worldview, and current identity construction*, d) *Christianity and ethics*, e) *Christianity and cultural comprehension*. These are legitimate reasons to accommodate the religious majority and keep the religious instruction (the way of faith within religion) of Christianity within the school system.

Should Iceland then teach Christianity without the provision of any minority religious instruction in the schools, even if minorities would be exempt from attending such class on the foundational faith? No, and the Icelandic government could decide to keep the policy of religious education only, as is now. It might not be wise for a couple of reasons: First, it imposes a policy that ignores the will of both majority and minority groups that want religious instruction within their schools. Second, it could remove the often much-needed balance of teaching that public schools would bring into religious instruction and might diminish respect for cultural diversity within religious circles. How then does an intercultural society respond to both the foundational majority and minorities that want religious instruction and religious education in their schools?

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<sup>148</sup> Tariq Modood, "Multiculturalism, Interculturalism and the Majority", *Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Debating the Dividing Lines*, editors Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood and Ricard Zapata-Barrero, Edinburgh: University Press, 2016, pg. 246-265, here pg. 262.

<sup>149</sup> Gunnar J. Gunnarsson, "Hvers vegna eru kristin fræði kennd í grunnskólum", *Vísindavefur.is*, 20. September 2005, retrieved 27. February 2021, from <https://www.visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=5275>.

Modood<sup>150</sup> suggests that if there truly is a national system in place, it would accommodate religious instruction for both the majority and minority groups. He emphasizes the equality approach, and thus minorities have no right to demand the ceasing of Christmas festivities within schools, but rather that celebrations would be extended to include, for example, Eid for Muslims and Diwali for Hindus.

Muslims in Europe seek accommodation within the current status, not wanting to overthrow it. How do we add the new faiths in with the existing ones to establish a cohesive, unified nation of Icelanders? That is the research and dialogue that needs to take place within the country. Interestingly, the group most uncomfortable with this approach to intercultural integration are the ideological secularists, not Christians or Muslims, says Modood. Diversity policy must strive towards a common national identity and cannot be neutral or blind to differences; it must be all-inclusive. The majority has precedence as a foundational culture, but together they need to make national identity a true reflection of all the citizens. They should extend their precedence and gradually include the minority groups. Inclusivity is the key.

By letting the data speak, we have now conclusively established that both Icelandic and Islamic cultural traits are a social construct. Nothing inherent should prevent the peaceful integration of Muslims into Icelandic society, as long as adequately managed. Such management is needed to facilitate cultural diversity as it comes together and unites in one cohesive Icelandic identity, where all can have a sense of belonging. Well, there is one more thing, Sharia.

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<sup>150</sup> Modood, “Multiculturalism, Interculturalism and the Majority”, pg. 262-263.

## 7 Icelandic Reality and Sharia

*Since human capacities and values conflict, every culture realizes a limited range of them and neglects, marginalizes and suppresses others. However rich it may be, no culture embodies all that is valuable in human life and develops the full range of human possibilities. Different cultures thus correct and complement each other, expand each other's horizon of thought and alert each other to new forms of human fulfillment. The value of other cultures is independent of whether or not they are options for us... unassimilable otherness challenges us intellectually and morally, stretches our imagination, and compels us to recognize the limits of our categories of thought.*

Bhikhu Parekh<sup>151</sup>

The rituals of Islam's Five Pillars might seem burdensome to non-Islamic Icelanders, but for Muslims, they are the expression of membership in the ummah or the community of believers. Unlike in many Christian nations of Europe, where the Enlightenment has brought in secularism that defies both religion and old tradition, Muslims want to lead a religious life in the spirit of tradition, there is no dividing of spiritual life from the earthly, Islam is *din*, life itself for Muslims.

This remains one of the deep and troubling chasms of Muslim integration in Europe, and for religious Muslims to integrate and be a part of Icelandic identity, Iceland needs to embrace devout Muslims and their desire for spirituality. It is foundational. There remains a lack of trust in many non-Muslims, as the perception is that this would mean contradictory values, with Sharia as the guiding light for Muslims. Many Icelanders believe that all Muslims interpret the Qur'an and Sharia in the manner of Islamic extremists; who has told them that? When integrating into Icelandic society, do Muslims have to ignore Sharia as a guiding light in their lives? Does Sharia necessarily conflict with Icelandic human rights policies?

The City council of Reykjavik approved the following as the basis for the City's human rights policy in October of 2016.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, London: Macmillan, 2000, pg. 167.

<sup>152</sup> Samþykkt borgarstjórnar, *Mannréttindastefna Reykjavíkurborgar: Grundvöllur mannréttindastefnu Reykjavíkurborgar*, 2016, 18. October, retrieved 5. April 2021, from [https://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/ymis\\_skjol/skjol\\_utgefid\\_efni/mannréttindastefna\\_reykjavikurborgar\\_0.pdf](https://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/ymis_skjol/skjol_utgefid_efni/mannréttindastefna_reykjavikurborgar_0.pdf).

*Human rights are protected in the Icelandic Constitution and numerous human rights conventions and declarations to which Iceland is a party. The City of Reykjavík's human rights policy is based on the human rights provisions of the Constitution and international conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The human rights policy is based on the principle of equality. It aims for all human beings to enjoy human rights regardless of origin, ethnicity, class, language, color, religion, life, political views, atheism, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, gender characteristics, age, economy, family, disability, health condition or any other condition.*

*The City of Reykjavík is guided by the equality of citizens and human rights in all endeavors and is committed to being at the forefront of human rights issues, emphasizing equal status for all genders. A unified human rights policy works against multifaceted discrimination, and it emphasizes a holistic vision for the benefit of the citizens, as many belong to more than one of the groups it covers. The human rights policy is based, among other things, on the Act of Equal Status and Equal Rights for Women and Men, No. 10/2008, from now on referred to as the Equality Act. The emphasis on equal rights for women and men should be visible in all City activities, and the position of the sexes should be examined separately in all the groups covered by the policy. That said, it should be kept in mind that traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity do not always apply and that not everyone defines themselves as either female or male.*

This policy of Reykjavík City is a true reflection of all of Iceland and begs the question can Muslims in this light comfortably integrate into Icelandic society, or is there too much of a gap? Some believe that Sharia speaks of such a gap and prevents all integration. An essential prerequisite for Muslims is to understand that the Sharia is not divine and does not derive such a nature from the sacred Qur'an. Sharia is a book of law the Qur'an is not; it was never meant to be a legal code.<sup>153</sup> Non-Muslim Icelanders need to understand the origin of Sharia and its meaning for Muslims, not to mention that the majority of Muslims have no desire to follow extremist groups' footsteps and seek their implementation of Sharia in an Islamic state. Let us look to see if this could work out in Iceland.

Two main methods of Qur'anic interpretation have evolved over the years, *tafsir* and *ta'wil*. Tafsir is primarily concerned with explaining the text's literal meaning, and ta'wil seeks the mystery, or *batin*, the underlying and eternal meaning. Therefore, tafsir answers

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<sup>153</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 172.



questions about context, chronology, and external interpretations, which helps Muslims live just lives from day to day, but ta'wil seeks the deeper, more mystical meaning of the text, an internal interpretation, and spiritual understanding. Each has evoked many sub-disciplines, such as the study of vocabulary, grammar, Qur'anic discourse, history of the Prophet, legal content, scientific variations, and esoteric, hidden meanings. Since the calling of Muhammad was a continuation of previously revealed word from God, the Qur'an likewise accepts the divine gift of various other religious books, which are used to shed light on the truth revealed.

*God! There is no God but Him. The eternal, the Self-Sustainer.  
He has sent down the Book to you with the Truth to confirm what is available of  
other revelations, as it is He who sent down the Torah and the Gospel  
beforehand as guidance to people*

The Qur'an Al-Imran 3:3

Such strict boundaries of Qur'anic interpretation are also valid for Sharia, but extremist Islamist groups ignore it altogether.

## **7.1 What is Sharia?**

As the Prophet's companions left for Yemen to call people to worship God, he appointed Muadh bin Jabal to head the small delegation. The Prophet had concerns. If there were differences between the groups or the people they would meet in Yemen, how would they settle disputes? He asked. "By referring to the Qur'an," Muadh replied. "And what if the answer is not in the Qur'an?" the Prophet asked. "By consulting your ways (or Sunnah) here in Medina," answered Muadh. "And what if my Sunnah has no precedent for your question, dear Muadh?" "I will exercise my own reason and judgment, O Prophet of God," responded Muadh. The Prophet smiled and praised God for Muadh's precise answer.

Muadh was among the most knowledgeable and upstanding of the Prophet's companions. The answer he gave before setting out to Yemen embodies the *spirit of Sharia* or Islamic law.<sup>154</sup> The literal meaning of Sharia in Arabic is 'path to water' and is the practical guide for Muslims on their path through life. One could say it is the practical outworking of the interpretation, and again it should be adhered to in the true spirit of the faith. In Iceland, as in most of Europe, it is still the most feared and controversial aspect of Islam.

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<sup>154</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 61.

About two hundred years or so after Muhammad's death, Islam had spread way beyond Mecca and Medina, so much that most of the time and effort of the learned men, the *Ulamas*, was spent on helping regulate the standard for the Islamic community in the new, and diverse empire.

The goal was that everyday life throughout the empire would be a true reflection of the Qur'an while keeping the local customs and spirit of things. They did not come up with one book of the law but a collection of references to four different resources: the *Islamic Sharia*.<sup>155</sup> As in the Prophet's conversation with Muadh, the four sources are, and in this order of importance: 1) *The Qur'an* 2) *The Sunnah* 3) *Qiyas* or analogy in case there is no apparent reference in the first two 4) *Ijma*, or the consensus of the Muslim community.

Any judgment or *fatwa* regarding questions pertaining to life issues can only be passed after consulting all four references. After consulting all four, there could be five possible responses to each and every question that believers brought before the Ulama: a) obligatory acts or *Wajib*, rewarded by God in the afterlife, b) denoted acts or *Mandub*, rewarded by God, c) not sinful acts, but preferably avoided, or *Makruh*, d) punishable acts by God in the afterlife, or *Haram*, e) permissible acts, or *Halal*. Sharia is thus a very complex document, and to add to the complexity, Abou El Fadl<sup>156</sup> says that Sharia is entirely based on each actor's interpretation, but at the same time, it is fundamental for Islamic values in society.

This again shows that Islam is not a 'one rule' homogeneous religion, and the Muslim stereotype is just that, a stereotype in the mind of the beholder.<sup>157</sup> Most Muslims long for inner spiritual life to be lived out in the community, and Sharia is their help to live as true Muslims. Sharia is the path to water for them.

*The foundation of the Sharia is wisdom and the safeguarding of people's welfare in this life and the next. In its entirety, it is about justice, mercy, wisdom, and goodness. Every rule which replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, the common good with mischief, and wisdom with folly is a ruling that does not belong to the Sharia, even though it might have been claimed to be according to some interpretation.*

Ibn al-Qayyum al-Jawzi (d.1350)<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Bernharðsson, *Mið-Austurlönd: Fortíð, nútíð og framtíð*, pg. 37.

<sup>156</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the extremists*, New York: Harper, 2007, pg. 99.

<sup>157</sup> Morris, *Religion and anthropology*, pg. 81-82.

<sup>158</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 72-73.

Here the Syrian jurist describes the true spirit of Sharia, as it lines up with the spirit of the Qur'an. To provide the correct interpretation in the spirit of the Qur'an, Islamic jurists early on used terms such as *istihsan*, to set aside judgments with negative effects; *istislah*, to choose the judgment that benefits the people; and *ma'ruf*, what is reasonable and fair. These guidelines are considered to be in the spirit of the Qur'an and help draw the correct conclusions and understanding. When such norms and interpretations are violated, there is a danger of the Qur'an and Sharia being used to advance one's own policies or politics and not as a source of moral and spiritual guidance.<sup>159</sup> It can thus be concluded that the purpose of interpretation is to awaken man's conscience as to draw moral and spiritual guidance for life and society as a whole from God's word.

So why the unjust and barbaric implementations with Sharia references, such as flogging, stoning, slavery, amputations, honor killing, and the condoning of gender inequality and oppression? These implementations are the key reason for fear of Islam. Under constant anti-Muslim discourse, the perceived idea is that all Muslims favor this, and Islam can thus never thrive in Western society because of it.

## 7.2 Sharia and Human Rights

Given the differences in understanding and interpretation among Muslims, it is only natural to ask about human rights and other controversial issues. How does Islam fit into the public sphere of Iceland, and can it happen peacefully? An important step is to allow for Islamic discourse to be heard and conveyed, says An-Na'im,<sup>160</sup> within the security and protection of a secular state.

The Muslim attitude towards human rights is based on each individual's social, cultural, and political context, not Islam. Again, some serious issues such as gender inequality, various gender diversity, and sexual orientation violations, and the rights of nonbelievers, point to a particular interpretation of Sharia. Thus, education is imperative to show that human rights do not conflict with Islam; intercultural dialogue plays an important role. Discourse influences people's words, actions, and reactions, Muslims are not excluded, and while various interpretations of the text continue, dialogue needs to occur.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and woman: Reading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, pg. xii, 10-11. Ingrid Mattson, *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life*, pg. 222, 231.

<sup>160</sup> David L. Johnston, "Islam and Human Rights: A growing Rapprochement?", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 74/2015, pg. 113-148, here pg. 141-142, retrieved 5. March 2021, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajes.12085>.

<sup>161</sup> Cesari, "Islam in the West", pg. 163.

Human rights, clearly defined within the European Convention on Human Rights, must be at the heart of the discourse, dialogue, and identity construction of Muslims in Europe and Iceland, just as with others. Human rights may not solve all problems, but we find social justice, human dignity, and empowerment for all.

Some of Sharia's harsh and anti-human rights interpretations lead to forced marriages, polygamy, domestic violence, and honor killings, even in Europe.<sup>162</sup> These factors, and the general strong patriarchal belief on the position of women in society, are most certainly in stark contrast with the more liberal Western values of equality in Iceland. For a peaceful integration of Muslims into Western society and reconciliation of human rights to Sharia, Muslim's perception of Sharia will need to change. For some, it has already changed, or there never was a contradiction.

Scholars point out that through the different Islamic schools, Sharia developed over the centuries with contextual, cultural processes influenced by both local contexts and the global practices of the Talmudic and Roman law. Sharia is a human-made attempt to give Muslim's faith-based ethics code, and every single source of the Islamic law is the result of human effort, except for the Qur'an.

The eternal message of the revelation shed light on specific societal situations, thus changed and grew with time, cultural change, and context, as Mecca vs. Medina revelations show. So, if the revelation changed to meet evolving needs of the community, how can one claim the human construction of Sharia to be carved in stone, inflexible, unchanging, and infallible sacred law?<sup>163</sup>

*Any verse (from the previous Books) We cause to be abrogated or forgotten*

*We will replace it with one like it or better.*

*Do you not know that God has power over all things?*

The Qur'an 2:106

*And if we replace one revelation with another - and God knows best what he confers*

*(from heaven) - they say, "You made it all up!"*

*Truly, most of them have no understanding.*

The Qur'an 16:101

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<sup>162</sup> Tibi, "Ethnicity of fear?" pg. 138.

<sup>163</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The origins, evolution and future of Islam*, pg. 169.  
Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 75.

These verses show that the Qur'an is a living text, and it evolves and adapts as the ummah evolves to meet its needs in every circumstance. The revelation stopped with the death of the Prophet, but the Qur'an is still living and speaks to modern-day Muslims in their cultural context. Interpreting the text and attempting to make it applicable outside of historical context is simply impossible, even though some try to.

There is a higher way in the spirit of the Qur'an, and Islam makes provision for it. It is called *ijtihad* and is the process of human reasoning and deliberation. *Ijtihad* was practiced by Muslim scholars for centuries, allowing for new interpretations in an everchanging world.

The Maliki jurist in Granada, Imam al-Shatibi (d.1388), brought forth a legal theory of *Maqasid al-Shariah*, the *higher objectives* of Sharia. Muslims should not adhere to the letter of the law but abide by its spirit. The higher objectives of Sharia are in steps with the overall spirit of the Qur'an and the hadith: *to conserve life, faith, family, intellect, and property*.

Husain<sup>164</sup> points out that Maqasid al-Shariah is all about the wisdom behind the rulings. Sharia is thus not about amputating the thief or whipping the fornicator; he says its higher aim is to preserve property and conserve the family. Most of the world's Muslim majority states do not whip, stone, or amputate; the consensus is to abide by the higher aim. Without Sharia law, most countries in Europe uphold the higher objectives of Sharia, and thus the West is Sharia-compliant, Husain says.

The reality is that Iceland most certainly upholds the higher objectives of Sharia. There is no genuine religious reason for Muslims not to thrive in Iceland.

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<sup>164</sup> Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History*, pg. 73-75.

## 8 Conclusion

Like most other European nations, Iceland is now being influenced by globalization, individualism, secularization, and even secularism. All this comes with growing diversity due to immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers knocking on the nation's doors. Diversity does away with ages of homogeneity, and it challenges identity construction of the past, as multiple identities rattle solidarity and the sense of belonging together. Such solidarity and cohesiveness are foundational for a free and democratic society of equality and thus needs to be a priority in any political diversity management policymaking. Sense of belonging together as one nation is imperative.

Religion and people's desire for leading a spiritual life in a safe and protective environment is an integral part of cultural diversity management, often overlooked or even considered unimportant at times. Icelandic Muslims bring Islam into the shared identity construction, the seemingly impossible religion to integrate if one listens to the neighboring countries.

The empirical facts in this thesis confirm that Muslims in Europe are the victims of social demarcation due to ethnic, racial, and nationalistic reasons. The 'othering' of Muslims is a growing problem in Europe, as a stereotypical construct is now placing all Muslims in one homogeneous group of people as if they were a single collective actor. The current loud voice of Jihadist groups and their particular Islamic interpretation, with its consequential actions, is a crucial factor in this Western 'otherizing' of Islam and social demarcation of Muslims as one ethnic group of rigid, impossible, and unfitting religion in the West. This again pushes for even further Muslim demarcation and is the cause of Muslim ghettos forming in European cities.

Therein lies the problem, not in Islam itself as a religion, but a particular type of interpretation and reaction to this interpretation. This interpretation is that of a Muslim minority group only, and data shows that the Muslim majority oppose it. Everything points to the fact that this extremist interpretation is far from being the accurate representation of Islam and is only used to legitimize political gain and ill-calculated rise to glory. It will, in the end, give in to the ideology and understanding of the global Muslim majority. It has no connection to the core of their faith but is a new and radical interpretation, opposing the current Islamic reformation.

This description of the European-Muslim relationship is not true for Iceland, but the gradual change of Muslim demarcation in Europe is a lesson to be learned. The data confirms that this does not have to be a problem.

*Firstly*, Iceland should know that there is nothing inherent in Islam as a religion, hindering the peaceful integration of Muslims into Icelandic society. Islamic societies have adjusted to pluralistic diversity when needed in the past, thus demonstrating Islamic flexibility. When looking to Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy in history, it is clear that it developed around a certain interpretation of the few, the Ulama, who had access to the text. Those in control of the scriptures control the religious discourse. The data shows that this has now changed, as multitudes have access to the text, and Islamic reformers are working tirelessly towards Islamic reformation, removing Islam from the narrow-minded interpretation.

The Qur'an and Islam per se are not the problems in Western societies, but anti-democratic and anti-human rights interpretation can be. The empirical fact is that Islam as a religion has no inherent anti-social, anti-pluralistic, anti-human rights, or anti-Western elements built into it; any such claim is to be found in the interpreter's mind, as taken out of both historical and societal context. Muslims, like any other human beings, long for peace, justice, freedom, and dignity, and possible hindrances to successful Muslim integration into Icelandic society are not to be found in the teaching of the Qur'an, but in a particular minority interpretation of it and a reactionary nationalistic demarcation of Muslims based on racism, ignorance, and fear.

*Secondly*, Iceland needs to make certain provisions in its immigration and diversity management policies, to accommodate and secure cohesive, successful integration of religious immigrants like Muslims. The deepening of various diversity in Iceland calls for a reevaluation of the existing policy to better facilitate solidarity and a sense of belonging. Such elements are considered in political philosophy to be imperative for the cultural meetings of diverse groups. Multiculturalism has been the political strategy for such meeting of cultures, but it has proven to be limited in its problem-solving in Europe, thus not leading the way in Muslim integration.

In recognizing diversity and protecting minority rights, political multiculturalism tends to do so at the cost of the majority group and the neglect of social solidarity. Other strategies should be considered. One such option is interculturalism, emphasizing the social-psychological side of human existence. The cooperation and interaction of people and groups within interculturalism aim to facilitate community building and shared identity construction. It is an effective tool in life, whether ethnical, cultural, linguistic, or religious.

The Western school of thought, the secularism of the Enlightenment, has entered Muslim realities, but it has not done away with their desire and determination to practice

their religion. This duality is a conflict in their minds and hearts. Interculturalism can help religious Muslims integrate and the majority group, religious or not, to not feel ignored or even threatened, thus preventing reactionary demarcation of Muslims.

The ideology of multiculturalism supports diversity, even to the degree of segregation. It thus calls for a unified religious education in public schools but separate religious instruction classes. On the other hand, interculturalism recognizes the foundational culture of the majority, as it embraces and gradually includes the new minority cultural traits into its foundation. Interculturalism wants open and thoroughly pluralistic schools with integrative, non-segregated religious education and religious instructions for all in schools.

The empirical data shows that problematic Muslim integration into Europe is due to a) a stereotypical demarcation of Muslims, b) the lack of understanding, and the inability of multiculturalism to cope with Muslim spirituality and desire for religious life in a secularistic society. Thus, Europe is now looking to interculturalism for help. Muslims are not looking to de-Christianize Western societies, they want the freedom to cultivate their faith alongside other religious groups on equal grounds in an open, secure, and genuinely pluralistic social environment. The best available diversity management paradigm and strategy that addresses these critical issues is interculturalism, whether intertwined with multiculturalism or in its replacement. It is the best available tool to achieve an inclusive Icelandic society. How does the nation move towards that goal? That is the research and dialogue that needs to take place within the country.

Such is a political decision in policymaking, as Iceland should work towards being a house of wisdom, *Bayt al-Hikmah*.



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