Thematic Session 45
“MUSLIMS AND RACE IN EUROPE”

Date
5-6 July 2017

Venue
34th Conference of the ISSR (International Society for the Sociology of Religion)
University of Lausanne, Switzerland
Room ANT4165

Session Chair and Organizer
Juliette Galonniér, PhD Sociology (Northwestern University & Sciences Po)

Thematic session blurb
This session invites papers examining the intersection of race and religion in the case of Muslims in Europe. The objective will be to discuss the relevance of framing European Muslims’ lived experiences in terms of race, racism and racialization. The “racialization of religion” is understood here as a process which assigns to faith traditions a number of phenotypical, somatic and moral characteristics construed as inborn and immutable. Despite their ethnic and cultural diversity, European Muslims are often lumped together into a homogeneous racial category (Arabs, South Asians, Turks, etc.). In turn, individuals belonging to these ethnic groups are frequently “religio-ized” as Muslim, irrespective of their actual religious beliefs. The stereotypical figure of the “Muslim” takes on ambivalent attributes since it conflates belief with national origin, ethnicity, culture, phenotype, skin color and negative moral values. It contributes to the essentialization and enduring stigmatization of European Muslims. The session encourages a renewed reflection on the concept of Islamophobia by bringing to the forefront an ethnic and racial studies perspective. Papers that track current instances of racial reasoning in relation to Muslims in Europe are welcome, as well as contributions that explore the historical genealogies of this racialization. Comparisons with anti-Semitism for instance, as well as other forms of otherization, are encouraged. The session also invites papers investigating how European Muslims navigate the ethno-racial stigma attached to their religion and the coping strategies they use to face Islamophobia.

Wednesday July 5th – 10.30am-12pm

ELISA BANFI, VISTA ESKANDARI, Université de Genève
“The Racialization of Muslims in Switzerland Through Laws”

In this article, we investigate the process of racialization of Muslims that occurred between 2001 and 2016 in Switzerland, through a post-colonial lens. Our analysis is based on the Swiss legislative process, appraised through the role of three specific actors: the Federal Assembly, the Federal Council and the Swiss citizen committees launching popular initiatives. The purpose of this article is to examine how Muslims are racialized in Switzerland and how this racialization is institutionalized. First, we consider the racialization of religion made by institutional actors, retrace phenotypical (1) and moral attributes (2) assigned to Muslims in the corpus under study. Second, we analyse the historical roots of the mobilised categories and especially how the categories used to racialize Muslims differ or not with respect to traditional racist repertories used for other minorities in the country. Third, we describe the peculiar racialising patterns of the three institutional contexts (executive, legislative and judicial). This article also attempts to investigate how non-Muslim Swiss institutional actors encourage Muslims to improve their « racial compatibility » through cultural whitening. We conduct standard qualitative analysis with the analytical tool Nvivo on the original database retrieved from the official websites of the Swiss Confederation and
of the Swiss Federal Supreme Court. Our data is based on a systematic collection of federal laws, information on elections and parliamentary debates in Switzerland concerning Islam and Muslims for the whole analysed period.

AMELIE PUZENAT, Université catholique d’Angers

« Penser la racialisation des musulmans en France à partir des ouvrages Race et Histoire (de C. Lévi-Strauss) et L’idéeologie raciste (de C. Guillaumin) »

A travers cette communication, prenant appui sur deux productions classiques issues de courants distincts de l’anthropologie et de la sociologie française, il s’agira de revenir sur les avancées conceptuelles dans la manière d’envisager la « race » et de voir en quoi elles permettent ou non de l’articuler au religieux et, par conséquent, de décrire la situation de la racialisation des musulmans en France. En premier lieu, nous traiterons de l’ouvrage Race et Histoire de Claude Lévi-Strauss qui, de par son intitulé et l’histoire de sa production, aurait pu laisser présager un éclairage sur l’intrication entre race et religion à travers le cas du judaïsme, mais opère un glissement du concept de race à celui de culture. En second lieu, nous nous attacherons à relever les points traitant de l’ambiguïté qui existe entre le registre religieux et racial au sein de l’ouvrage de C. Guillaumin, L’idéeologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel. En dernier lieu, nous reviendrons sur notre propre terrain d’enquête auprès de convertis à l’islam d’après lequel nous pouvons dire que la racialisation s’inscrit notamment à la surface du corps des croyants (port du voile ou de la barbe). Ces signes distinctifs d’appartenance religieuse finissent par devenir, d’après les regards extérieurs, des signes à une appartenance racialisée.

JUSUF SALIH, University of Dayton

“The Dichotomy Between Ethnicity and Religiosity in Kosovo”

For more than four decades, the Balkans were under the Communist regime. When the Berlin Wall was shattered and peoples’ spiritual feelings were reappearing across Eastern Europe, people in Kosovo had to struggle not to reexamine their religiosity only, but to brawl for their national identity as well. While struggling in adapting to a new political assembly in a modern and pluralistic society, detachment from the past is still prevalent. The memories of war traumas are still fresh (thousands are still missing since the war ended and families are hoping that at least the remains of their bodies will be found). Moreover, although independent, Kosovars have to adjust in working with the international community in rebuilding their governmental institutions: many international organizations from the UN and the EU are helping and observing local institutions. It is important to emphasize that although Albanians belong to different faiths (Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox), historically there is no record that shows that there was any religiously-based clash among them. Their national identity was the strongest bond that played a major role in their peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance and acceptance. Religion has been part of a tradition and cultural identity that was inherited from generation to generation, but now this tradition is sometimes being challenged. This paper will explore some crucial contemporary questions and discuss the major issues of Kosovars’ religiosity and national identity at the time of their nation building.

BARBARA DELLWO, Université de Lausanne

“‘Classization’ of Religion? The Intersection of ‘Race’ and ‘Class’ in the Framing of the Muslim Question”

With notions such as “cultural racism” or “racialization of religion”, recent developments in the study of Muslim presence in Europe have allowed us to better grasp the intersecting dimensions at stake in discrimination. These notions seem nevertheless to overlook a crucial aspect of the intersection, namely class. As I could observe during my fieldwork in the Lake Geneva area, Muslims are not considered in the same way depending on whether they are a factory worker, a housekeeper, a banker or a diplomat. In Switzerland indeed, where the Muslim presence is mainly due to recent migration, we are witnessing a growing class-based dichotomy in the perception of migratory phenomena, between “desirable” and “undesirable” migrants. The latter refers to labour migrants or refugees, thought of as a threat to national identity and at the heart of debates on “integration”, whereas the former applies to highly skilled and mobile professionals, conceived as resources and coveted by the nation state. In this context, the debate on migration and integration has turned into a debate on Islam and Muslims. These “undesirable” migrants are undergoing an increasing process of otherization, with their “culture” being presented as incompatible with “European values” (e.g. secularism, democracy, gender equality). I argue here that this negative framing of Muslims in cultural terms (cultural racism) conceals the class-related aspects of domination, or, to put it in other
words, that the “racialization” of Muslims results from an implicit class ascription. This communication will thus be an invitation to explore the “classization” of religion.

Thursday July 6th – 10.30am-12pm

JAAAFAR ALLOUL, KU Leuven
“Muslimness as Race in Europe: Grasping the Contours of Racial Transformation Through a Case Study on Emigration Motives of Second Generation Maghrebi-Muslims”

This paper discusses how European citizens with a Maghrebi-Muslim background relate to a shifting European environment, where their presence, identity, and alleged national loyalty is increasingly questioned in the public sphere. As highlighted through a qualitative case study on the “second generation” in Western Europe (Belgium, France, The Netherlands) that are today emigrating to Dubai in the Arab Gulf, appreciations of “Muslimness” and “Europe” feature predominantly by reference to negative social experiences that lie at the intersection of both color-coded as well as ethno-religious permutations of race. The paper therefore questions the relevance of applying a “racial transformation” paradigm, as conceived by US scholars in relation to “blackness” and/or “catholicness”, onto the emerging “Muslim Question”. It does so by delving into Europe’s late modern, neo-Christian genealogy (moral geography), not least its historical relationship with the Semitic/Jewish Other, and by questioning these historical structures’ very ramifications for the formation of novel Muslim dispositions of (Heideggerian) unheimlichkeit in Europe as “home”. In doing so, it argues that aspiring middle-class minority publics do not only struggle with access to labor under a neoliberal restructuring of the market place, but also with a reinforced set of racialized boundaries, which altogether seem to spur a form of “status emigration” from Europe that is seldom addressed in the study of Islam in Europe. As such, this paper not only unsettles the established idea of (fortress) Europe as a site for mere immigration, but it highlights simultaneously the importance of socio-cultural considerations in the complex study of human mobility, that require attention in conjunction with economic “push” factors.

MONIKA SALZBRUNN, Université de Lausanne

West African Sufis residing in Europe are facing a multi-layered racisation and homogenisation process of their religion: As Muslims, they can be subjected to mistrust, hostile perceptions and Islamophobic reactions from non-Muslims, although they are also subjected to rejections from certain fundamentalist Muslims who claim a unique power of definition over Islamic norms. Furthermore, as Sub-Saharan Africans, they can be subjected to racism but not to Islamophobia because in other circumstances, they are less subjected to phenotype-based religious ethnicisation and racialisation processes, which associate Muslims exclusively with (negatively connoted) Arabs. The present contribution will show how Senegalese Sufi groups in Switzerland cope with ethno-racial stigmata, turning them into a powerful resource in order to distinguish themselves from “Arab” Muslims and countries from which “Some come back with weird clothes and long beards”. By insisting on a peaceful ideology and history, namely in the history of resistance against French colonizers, Senegalese Sufis position themselves as representatives of a peaceful Islam fighting with only spiritual forces. Furthermore, they develop worldwide religious institutes of (higher) education like the Touba Al-Azhar Institutes in order to increase their independence from Arab institutions and thinking. From their viewpoint, this protects their followers from racist and downgrading experiences and bellicose ideologies.

KIRSTEN WESSELHOEFT, Vassar College
“Countering Islamophobia as Anti-Racist Activism in Contemporary France”

The intertwined dynamics of racialization and religification of individuals with Muslim background in Europe have produced “Muslim” as an embodied and essentialized social category, with deep ties to rationales and strategies of colonial governance. This has resulted in the stereotyping, stigmatization of, and discrimination
against people who are racialized as “Muslim,” regardless of their level of personal identification with Islamic practice. For several decades, social scientists have observed that this dynamic has contributed to the valence of Islam as a form of social and political resistance in Europe. Relatedly, in the 21st century, activism against Islamophobia has developed alongside a new generation of anti-racist activism, recognizing the racialized nature of anti-Muslim discrimination in contemporary Europe. This paper compares three French activist groups that combat Islamophobia and racism—the Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France [CCIF], the Parti des Indigènes de la République [PIR], and Lallab, focusing on the categories of race, ethnicity, and religion that animate their work. Based in a comprehensive review of these organizations’ published writings, websites, and social media presences, as well as ethnographic interviews with activists, we investigate to what extent and through what strategies these organizations resist the racialization of Islam, even as they identify anti Muslim discrimination as a form of racism. This paper articulates the conceptual underpinnings of contemporary French activism around race, ethnicity, religion, and decolonization, and demonstrates how the valence of racial and religious categories continues to shift, propelled in part by the work of social justice activists.