RePLITO

Europe's Minority Management Machine

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Much of the current European research on the 'Muslim Question', or any other minority in Europe has been defined as a *problem* (Roma, refugees, etc.) and framed in terms of 'management'. The frame is a comparative one that emphasizes the necessity of *integration* of the other and the tolerance of the majority. The frame is bolstered by its 'good' intentions, which not only minimises the actual violent effects of these practices, but also masks the structural power inequalities. This management frame scrutinizes the 'minority' rather than the system itself. The other is put under the microscopic lens to be studied and dissected. With regard to Muslim/minority management, it is the government and its state apparatus that decides which 'Muslim voice' requires political representation, what it means to integrate, and which Muslims have *successfully* integrated. This 'top-down' application of power has a huge often unbearable weight on the lives of Muslims. As a result, it is of the utmost importance to understand how the government, whether national or transnational (in the case of the EU), makes decisions about how to 'manage' minorities.

With the exception of the Iberian Peninsula, Western Europe did not have a substantial Muslim population until after the Second World War. This fact seemingly justifies the limited temporal scope of much of the current literature. However, this temporal restriction limits the frame of the political analysis to the modern 'secular' nation-state. It is my contention that the limited post-1945 focus that accentuates the different national identities of these European states obscures the previously hegemonic theological horizon of Christianity in Europe. It is this assumption I seek to explore by examining the 'European Question' in terms of *temporality* and *political-theology*. Political theology analyses the secularised, previously Christian, theological concepts that structure contemporary politics (e.g. sovereignty). Its aim is to examine and expose how theological forms and models of power continue to operate, often inconspicuously, in politics today. This essay is an attempt to recover the genealogy of *one aspect* of political theology in contemporary Europe, namely the origins of the proliferation of representative bodies that act as interlocutors of the state. My aim is to recover the kernel of a European political structure, in which theology played, and in its secularised form continues to play, a critical part. Specifically, it is my contention that Europe's 'minority management system' *is by no means new* but has its roots in the politico-theological framework of intercessions instituted by the Catholic Church.

My reason for returning to the past is to consider what structural patterns remain present today. I thus, inspired by Said, turn to the past to shine light on the present, I turn to the Jews to think about Muslims today. My claim is that the inclusion of Islamic

groups in European political institutions, in particular those that communicate with governmental institutions, is arranged in a manner analogous to the earlier 'inclusion' of Jewish minorities. This method is similar to the one that was previously used to manage the Jewish minority (and to a lesser extent to that of other 'minority' religions, i.e., Catholicism in predominantly Protestant countries or vice-versa).

To repeat the warning - this piece focuses on the similarities - a focus which of course comes at the cost of studying differences - differences that are often the focus of research that I have begun to be highly suspicious of. There are of course differences, but why is it so controversial to talk about similarities in this particular domain? In my suspicious analysis, the 'white-washed' history of the post-Shoah 'inclusion' of Jews in Europe (a euphemism for genocide?), as evidenced by the problematic reference to Europe's 'Judeo-Christian' tradition during debates on the European constitution, is used to silence Muslims (whether individually or collectively) who voice their dissent regarding the state's 'management of Islam'. No mention is made of the role the Shoah, and specifically Europe's responsibility or shame, had in this 'integration' process. By turning the gaze towards Europe, I am not suggesting that Jews and Muslims do not have agency - although this agency is often reduced by the state or that there is nothing to gain in this process, especially as individuals (due to the current neo-liberal structures of the state). My aim is to highlight Europe's often hidden responsibility and role in the structural process of othering. Nonetheless, both groups do continue to play an important role, whether by challenging this process or by internalising it, and, as such, both are *partially* responsible for the structural relations between the state and their respective groups.

Let us look at the Catholic political practice of "intercessions" (*shtadlanut*) as a means to control and manage relations between state power and Jewish communities by means of a privileged elite. This intercessory practice, known in Yiddish as *shtadlanut*, was imposed upon Jewish communities in Europe in order to govern them since the Middle Ages (taking different forms over time). This management practice, and its informal institutionalisation in Europe, is conceptually well-charted and was not only part of Europe's internal legacy as many Jewish minority management practices were imposed across the globe by means of colonialism.

From Roman times onwards, with very few exceptions, Jewish communities under Christian rule viewed changes in the dominant society with uncertainty and fear. For the vast majority of Jews, who had little interactions with those outside of their community, political change had the potential to lead to violence, increased poverty,

forced relocations, and fatalities. Yet this political realm, which many Jews equated with persecution rather than emancipation, could not be completely avoided, as it was necessary to have input with regard to affairs that would affect their own community. The theological structure that was politically imported to permit such communication was that of intercessions. After (most often) having paid a stipulated financial sum, a Jew – acting as spokesman for his community – was permitted to approach the authorities, to prostrate himself, and beg for them to intercede in a particular affair of importance to the Jewish community. The *shtadlan*, a member of the elite, was selected by the Jewish community to maintain contact with the authority, as a means to exert influence from below (without actually engaging in political action) in a practice known as *shtadlanut*. The practice of *shtadlanut* was a common one from the Middle Ages until modernity when there were even ‘professional’ *shtadlans* who interceded on behalf of several different Jewish communities. The practice of *shtadlanut* called for intercessions with regard to taxation, accusations of blood libel, and other accusations of religious transgressions – problems that affected the entire Jewish community. Lobbying is a political-theological translation of this term.

In medieval times the Jews appointed the *shtadlan* with the approval of the external authorities, but from the 17th century the *shtadlan* was designated by the authority most often without consultation from the Jewish community he ‘represented’. This change is a fundamental one with regard to the governance practice of minorities. By the time of absolute monarchy, the choice of *shtadlan* was made not in the best interests of his community but based on criteria determined by the authorities, such as his linguistic skills, social adeptness, politics (or lack thereof) and his economic assets. This change further added to the precarity of the Jewish community, for if the *shtadlan* failed to keep the favour of the monarch, the Jewish communities were often denied all rights and/or residency. The shift to a *shtadlan* chosen by the state also affected how the *shtadlan* was perceived by the Jewish community he ‘represented’. By the 18th century, the prominent or ‘court Jew’ served the prince or lord in exchange for privileges and special protection. Yet these privileges/protection slowly became more and more limited to individuals, which led to the *shtadlan* being viewed by the wider Jewish community as ‘a tool of the government’ who only sporadically acted in their best interest. This led to a significant division within the Jewish community between on the one hand, the educated ‘enlightened’ and economically independent Jews (who were often permitted to reside within the walled city centres), and the majority of Jews who were financially limited and who lived outside the city proper. In the end, two

Jewish communities existed that slowly grew apart from each other and failed to see themselves as politically connected.

By the end of the long 19th century, many Christians recognized the riches that colonial adventures offered and took over the Jewish financial niche. It was only when this particular group of wealthy and highly educated Jews were no longer of instrumental use to the state that they realized their own lack of power. This powerlessness was further amplified by the fact that the vast majority of Jews did not know how to act politically (with notable exceptions such as the Yiddish socialist Bund and certain Zionist groups), as centuries of *shtadlanut* had led them naively to believe that this type of intercession was the sum of all politics. Furthermore, the perception in non-Jewish society that most Jews failed to express a political position led to the association of all Jews (even though only certain privileged Jews were publicly known) with the nation-state, an association which was, according to Hannah Arendt (among other scholars), fundamental to modern antisemitism (approx. 1870s). This is one effect of the depoliticising aspect of the practice of *shtadlanut*, a devious form of minority management.

While the practice of *shtadlanut* until the 19th century could be justified in the name of emancipation, in the 20th century the Nazis integrated this structure into the Final Solution. Less than a month after the start of WWII, Heydrich issued a letter stipulating the formation of the *Judenrat* in all occupied territories. The Nazi party leadership explicitly chose to use this 'management' strategy, as it was taken to be an integral structural component in the daily controlling of the ghettos which also required the least 'cost' in terms of Nazi/Gestapo manpower. This is the same criteria previously used to appoint *shtadlans*. While *shtadlans* were often rewarded with privileges, such as extra rights and recognition, members of the *Judenrat* had much more limited power and authority, and their daily existence was a precarious one; their lives, as well as those they loved, were on the line. Most often, they did not choose their roles, as was the case with *shtadlans* after the 18th century. Nonetheless, most believed – like *shtadlans* – that they were acting in the best interest of the larger Jewish community by assisting the Nazis in managing the ghettos and organising the deportations. Without using the moral language of blame, which is inappropriate here, it is essential we learn to judge political choices and actions (and not people themselves); to fail to do so leads to further powerlessness and depoliticisation. The importance of the story of the *Judenrat* is to show how exclusionary, controlling and depoliticising structures can lead to practices that – especially when internalised – can have devastating effects. This fact, when put into the historical context of the

theological-political practice of *shtadlanut*, understood in terms of a structural mechanism of power, sheds light on similar mechanisms used to communicate and control other minority religious communities. Many of its features, such as its disempowering and depoliticising effects, are part and parcel of most majority-minority political struggles.

While this political-theological structure is no longer overtly in place, it is my contention that the structural mechanism of exclusion it produced reappears in reconfigured ways today in the form of top-down managed Muslim representational bodies in many European nation-states. It is this enforced collaboration with power in combination with reduced agency, powerlessness and depoliticisation that I claim goes beyond the 'Jewish Question' and should be understood as central to the 'European Question'. To put it simply and (intentionally) provocatively, Europe is environmentally conscientious, it recycles its racism.

While until this century Jews were framed as the internal other and Muslims the external other, the Shoah and post-World War II migration have changed this Orientalist frame. Moreover, with the assistance of the power of framing, a political strategy that cannot be underestimated in the 21st century when the media has come to define reality, it is possible to accelerate a mechanism that previously might have taken centuries to institutionalise itself. The continued presence of this Orientalist frame is evident today. A dominant prejudice against Muslims in Europe is that there is a bond between 'all Muslims'. When someone, labelled by the media as a Muslim, commits a misdemeanour – it is seen as normal to turn to the nearest mosque and ask the 'representative' to denounce the perpetrator. All differences – linguistic, ethnic, religious, and gender— disappear to be replaced by prejudicial perceptions much like the false homogenising perceptions of Jews created by the practice of *shtadlanut*. This tendency to homogenise and reduce the other is, according to Said, part and parcel of the common roots of antisemitism and Orientalism, and more specifically the many forms of Islamophobia that are to be seen in the media across Europe. This homogenisation is thus part of the discursive association of Jews and Muslims/Arabs in the European social imaginary, an association that is implicitly propagated by management practices such as *shtadlanut*. Likewise Said notes how Muslims have internalised this frame, an internalisation which is normalised and further leads to internal frictions and depoliticisation.

Many contemporary scholars of Islam in Europe have begun to investigate a new rhetoric of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims as well as tighter control and regulation of

Muslim councils. What is clear from our analysis of the practice of *shtadlanut* is how these two phenomena are related. Much like the discussions in the past about Jews having divided loyalties, Muslims in Europe are suspected and scrutinised as being equally divided in their loyalties. The good Muslims, like the good Jews of the 19th-20th century, are 'integrated' or 'assimilated' individuals, secularised liberals who have 'become' law-abiding Muslims (not law-abiding citizens). The 'bad Muslims' cannot be trusted, are all potential terrorists and disloyal to the state. Just as liberal administrators and politicians in the 19th century argued that Jews could "become more human than Jews" through inclusion (citizenship and political equality), the majority of mainstream political and media discourse today seek to integrate 'good' Muslims and separate them from 'bad Muslims'.

The second emerging phenomenon concerns the creation and regulation of Muslim councils both at the national and transnational level. As each nation-state has its own particular history and position on state-church relations, there are undoubtedly many differences. For example, one important difference is the fact that Jews were often, though not always, stateless minorities. By contrast, Muslims in Europe today are not stateless (many even have dual citizenship). Likewise, with the birth of the EU, the transnational aspect also requires further analysis. Nonetheless, there is still a parallel worth considering on both levels, as Jews were also seen as loyal to their transnational religious brethren and not to their state.

Without any pretence of being exhaustive or scientific, let us consider the effects of this minority management system in several exemplary European nations. The most well-known cases of this are with regard to the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) which was created in response to 9/11 and yet framed as a means to recognise Muslims. This led to a bottom up reaction to government interventions with regard to the selection of '*personnalités qualifiées*', leading to the CFCM being defined as a "puppet of the government" ([Loobuyck, Debeer, & Meier, 2013](#)). What also makes the French case special is that it has been fully translated into the *laïc* rhetoric of councils for cultural (and not religious) organisations. Likewise in Germany, 'minorities' are still expected to conform to the demands of the governments in order to be recognised. Scholars studying the DIK (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*) describe it as a top-down governmental technique, reductive of Muslim agency, aimed to fashion 'good' liberal Muslims. To be expected, this led to many internal struggles, the disbanding of the DIK in order to 'deradicalise', and more generally a failure to improve the life of the community it was 'created' to represent. While each national context has its particularities, the structural similarities eclipse these national differences.

In these cases, and many more across Europe, minority management techniques leads to a catch-22. Either 'integrate', although one will never be fully included or belong, or live as a pariah – individually or with other pariahs. One often forgotten example of this were Jewish anarchists in the inter-bellum period who were framed as violent terrorists and publicly vilified. While further research is necessary to explore this potential structural similarity, it is certainly worth exploring in relation to contemporary accusations of Muslims, groups and individuals, framed and spurned as fanatics and/or radicals. These same Muslims are often accused of being disloyal to the state and are often under surveillance, excluded from membership in these councils and the target of other forms of discrimination. While there remains much to be explored – an examination the state may not appreciate and will certainly not fund – I do hope this analysis of *shtadlanut* in which I have shown how Jewish communities were internally divided between “good” and “bad”, “managed” by the ruling powers, and homogenised, shows that representative councils can be instrumentalised to enforce collaboration with power, reduce agency and promote de-politicisation, all of which goes beyond the “Jewish Question”. In this vein, we must turn our gaze on Europe and consider how, and why, it continues to make ‘others’ into problems. By doing so, we can challenge the frame of the contemporary “Muslim Question”.

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