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Towards a Catalan Islam: A Comparative Case Study with Flanders

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LIST OF ACRONYMS:

Catalan/Spanish Muslim Institutions:
CICC = *Consell Islàmic i Cultural de Catalunya* (Islamic and Cultural Council of Catalonia)
CIE = *Comisión Islámica de España* (Islamic Commission of Spain)
FEERI = *Federación Española de Entidades Religiosas Islámicas* (Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Organizations)
UCIDCAT = *Unió de Comunitats Islàmiques de Catalunya* (Union of Islamic Communities of Catalonia)
UCCIC = Unió de Centres Culturals Islàmics de Catalunya (Union of Islamic Cultural Centres of Catalonia)
UCIDE = *Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España* (Union of Islamic Communities of Spain)

Catalan Political Parties:
AC = *Aliança Catalana* (Catalan Alliance)
CDC = *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia), later CiU
CiU = *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union), later JxCat
JxCat = *Junts per Catalunya* (Together for Catalonia)
PSC = *Partit Socialista de Catalunya* (Catalan Socialist Party)
PxC = *Plataforma per Catalunya* (Platform for Catalonia)

Flemish/Belgian Muslim Institutions:
EMB = *Executief van de Moslims van België* (Executive of Belgian Muslims)
FMV = *Federatie van Marokkaanse Verenigingen* (Federation of Moroccan Associations)
UTV = *Unie van Turkse Verenigingen* (Union of Turkish Associations)

Flemish Political Parties:
N-VA = *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance)
VB = *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish Block), later Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest)

Other Institutions:
DGAR = *Direcció General d'Afers Religiosos* (General Directorate of Religious Affairs)
Diyanet = *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* (Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs)
SRCR = *Secretariat de Relacions amb les Confessions Religioses* (Secretariat for Relations with Religious Confessions)

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Context of the research

Despite a long common history that includes episodes such as the collaboration between King Francis I of France and the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent against the troops of Emperor Charles V (Arıkanlı, 2022), or the self-proclamation of Kaiser Wilhelm II as a "friend" of Muslims after visiting Damascus in 1898 (Habermas, 2014, p. 245), the construction of western modernity has insisted on placing the followers of Islam in a category of otherness (Hurd, 2003). The permeability of the Mediterranean, historically perceived as a commercial highway, has been substituted by an understanding of the sea as a civilisational border, reinforcing the image of Europe as an entity separated from its southern and eastern neighbours by antagonistic religious traditions (Zartman, 1967).

The Arab expansion of the seventh century, halted by Charles Martel at Poitiers, and that of the Ottomans, culminating in the Battle of Vienna in 1683, have served as the pillars of a narrative obsessed with drawing an iron line between the Christian and Muslim worlds (Berger, 2013). This image, weakened during the Cold War years, regained strength in the early 1990s thanks to Samuel Huntington's theories about the "clash of civilisations" that would replace the confrontation between the capitalist West and the socialist East (Huntington, 1993). The strength of such theories, reinforced by the emergence of a global and violent Islamism led by groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, has served to reactivate a discourse that sees Islam as something alien and fundamentally incompatible with European values (Marranci, 2004).

To this must be added the increase in the population of countries with a Muslim tradition in Western Europe, a phenomenon that began in the 1960s and that has favoured the study of

Islam in Europe from the point of view of migration policy (Preljević & Ljubović, 2021). This premise, which systematically ignores the earlier presence of Islamic communities in places such as Albania, Bosnia and Poland—it should be remembered that in the aforementioned Battle of Vienna, King John III Sobieski led contingents of Muslim Tatars who fought against the Ottomans (Wiktor-Mach, 2008)—, explains the Islamophobic discourses that have catapulted figures such as Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel and Geert Wilders, all defenders of a supposed national identity that would be threatened by the arrival of immigrants of Muslim origin (Kaya & Tecmen, 2019).

The reality, however, is that a large proportion of Muslims living in the European Union today are no longer immigrants but full citizens for whom it is not possible to legislate differently without resorting to segregationist and unconstitutional policies. The same problem of perception also affects the point of view of politicians who, in recent decades, have tried to propose measures to accommodate Islam by creating institutions to represent Muslims living in Europe. But, as Professor Ayhan Kaya points out, the success of such bodies depends on the existence of believing subjects who are willing to remain within the confines of the religious community, without the need to integrate into society (Kaya, 2009).

The institutionalisation of Islam, an idea promoted both by the French and German governments with the creation of bodies such as the German Coordinating Council of Muslims or the French Muslim Council (Kaya, 2009) and by the European Commission, promoter of the Muslim Council for Cooperation in Europe (Castaño Riaño, 2015), has not only run up against this—rather ethical—problem but has also had to contend with the lack of a hierarchical structure recognised by all Muslims. To this complexity, one should add the process of individualisation of the faith experienced by a large proportion of the believers of Islam established in Europe. This sum of factors increases the complexity of the legislator's understanding of the situation of Islam in the old continent and makes it necessary to carry

out an in-depth study in order to understand the peculiarities not only of each European country, but also of the different branches of Islam that coexist within them and that are disseminated both from the mosques and from the Internet, a tool that more and more people are using to approach Islam (Kaya, 2009).

This is an exciting challenge, key to the future development of European politics, and of particular interest in the case that this thesis will examine: that of Islam in Catalonia. This autonomous community, with its own culture, language, and history of statehood dating back to the 9th century (Tzagkas, 2018), has the peculiarity of being the region of the country with the largest number of Muslims. Despite the fact that Article 16 of the Spanish Constitution expressly prohibits anyone from being forced to "declare their ideology, religion, or beliefs" (Bensaid, 2019, p. 32), the demographic study of the Muslim population carried out by the *Observatorio Andalus*í in 2022 puts the number of citizens of "Muslim tradition" in Catalonia at 660,392 (UCIDE, 2025). This figure, which represents 8.2% of the population of the autonomous community, places it more in line with countries such as France, with 8.8% of Muslims, and Belgium, with 7.6%, than with the rest of Spain, where Muslims represent less than 3% of the population (Hackett et al., 2017).

On this basis, Catalonia is an anomaly within the "southern European exceptionalism," a category that includes states such as Greece and Italy, where discourses on the accommodation of Islam still seem distant to the population as a whole (Magazzini et al., 2024, p. 105). Catalonia, like the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, is also one of the few places in the European Union with an Islamic past, a fact that deserves to be taken into account when drawing up policies that are different from those attempted in other countries on the continent. If one adds to this specificity the role of Morocco and its policy of diaspora control, promoted since 2008 by the European Council of the Moroccan Ulama (Kaya &

Drhimeur, 2023), the case of Catalan Islam becomes something worthy of being studied in a master's thesis on the EU integration process and the relationship of this entity and its members with the rest of the world.

1.2. Research Question

In his 2008 study on the presence of Islam in Catalonia, Jordi Moreras put the number of Muslims in Catalonia at between 300,000 and 350,000. At the time, Moreras defined these figures as a clear symbol of "settlement" in the territory (Moreras, 2008, p. 23). This idea, which served to affirm that what was once a “transplanted” Islam was now an “implanted” one (Moreras, 2008, p. 13), is even more evident today, when, according to the aforementioned figures, the presence of Muslims in Catalonia has doubled.

This is not the only reality that has changed and intensified over the last two decades. The loss of importance of the independence conflict in the Catalan media agenda has been accompanied by an increase in debates about immigration. In 2015, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, 2% of Catalans considered immigration to be the main problem facing Catalonia, while in the most recent survey by the Centre for Opinion Studies, this figure rose to 8.4% (Ríos Fernández, 2024). This trend would explain the rise of groups such as Catalan Alliance (AC), the first anti-immigration party linked to Catalan nationalism and with a presence in the regional parliament. Its leader, Silvia Orriols, not only criticises the current migration model but also focuses her attacks on the country's large Muslim community, going so far as to declare herself openly “Islamophobic” (Orriols, 2023).

As these discourses gain strength, attracting 3.77% of voters in the last regional election (Gencat, 2024), the gap between the Muslim community and the rest of Catalans is widening.

This situation makes it necessary to seek political solutions that avoid further political and social divisions and, at the same time, promote the accommodation of a faith that is already that of a significant percentage of Catalan citizens. However, before making clear proposals that can have a real impact on the population, it is necessary to start with a question that is as simple and obvious as it is fundamental: **What are the main challenges and opportunities for accommodating Islam in Catalonia?** Only by answering this question can the foundations be laid for a policy that is both effective and coherent—in other words, capable of learning from past mistakes.

1.3. State of the Art

About the presence of Islam in Catalonia and its challenges and opportunities, one can quote some articles that have been published in the last two decades. One of them is *Musulmans a Catalunya. Radiografia d'un islam implantat*, a study written by Jordi Moreras with the aim of analysing different aspects of the Muslim community in Catalonia at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. It provides relevant information on the number of Muslims living in Catalonia at the time—between 300,000 and 350,000—and their countries of origin—mainly Morocco and Pakistan—as well as the number of mosques in the country, their economic conditions, and the role played by their imams.

A large part of the essay is devoted to the role of the two Muslim organisations—UCIDE and FEERI—recognised by the cooperation agreement signed in 1992 by the Spanish government and the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE) with the aim of identifying a valid interlocutor between the country's existing Muslim communities. Moreras defines this agreement as an example of unification from above, which, by prioritising an institutional logic that operates at a vertical level, has slowed down the development of Muslim organisations in Spain,

allowing the 31.6% of Muslim entities to exist without being represented within the Commission (Moreras, 2008).

The text also highlights the importance of distinguishing between the Islamic faith as a religious practice and the Muslim community as a collective. It points out that while Islam as a religion does not possess any exceptional characteristics that would prevent it from being treated like other faiths within institutional frameworks, Muslims as a group may face additional challenges in integrating into the public sphere that go beyond those related to the recognition of Islam as a minority religion.

Thus, the author argues that invoking religious freedom alone is insufficient to address the reality of social exclusion, which instead calls for more inclusive measures in social policy and guarantees of equal access to the welfare system. In this sense, Moreras also stresses the need to stop seeing Islam as a temporary phenomenon linked exclusively to immigration and to consider it as another part of Catalan society. For this reason, Moreras concludes his text with a series of recommendations that would favour genuine accommodation of the Muslim community within the geographical limits of Catalonia, as well as the creation of a fully Catalan Islam.

Beyond these lines of action, which would imply "strengthening the representation of the Muslim collective," "ceasing to identify religious practice with a particular national or cultural origin," and "combating negative perceptions of Islam in society" (Moreras, 2008, pp. 98–100), the text raises some questions worthy of further study. One of these is the role of the Islamic and Cultural Council of Catalonia (CICC), an association created in 2000 with the support of the Moroccan government. Examining the evolution of this body in the seventeen years since Moreras wrote this essay could be useful in discussing the claim that Islam in Catalonia is not funded by the Moroccan and Saudi states.

Another interesting document is *The governance of religious diversity in stateless nations: the case of Catalonia*, written by Mar Griera and published in *Religion, State and Society* in 2016. This article analyses the evolution of the measures taken by Catalan governments in the field of religious governance since the creation of the Secretariat for Relations with Religious Confessions (SRCR) in 2000. Based on the ideas of Zapata and Barreno on the different attitudes of states and their constituent nations towards the reception of religious minorities, Griera examines the characteristics that have distinguished the Spanish state and Catalonia in their relationship with Islam. Contrary to the supposed incompatibility between the demands of minority nations—such as the Flemish or the Québécois—and those of immigrants, who tend to integrate into the dominant culture and become an element of pressure in the nation-building process, the author shows that the Catalan government has tried to do the opposite by turning religious policy into an instrument of political self-determination (Griera, 2016).

As she was able to confirm through interviews with former directors of the SRCR, the author explains that, although the Generalitat had no powers in religious matters until 2006, it took advantage of the weakness of Spanish religious policy to intervene in this area. Thanks to that, the Catalan government has been able to draw a line between the Catalan and Spanish nations by providing a narrative based on the region's welcoming nature. Griera's essay also contains some data of interest for this thesis, such as the fact that the immigrant stock in Catalonia is now higher than the average immigration rate in Europe, becoming an even more specific case because while "Europe took around 45 years to reach a level of 10% of the immigrant population," in Catalonia this process took "between 10 and 15 years" (Rodon & Franco-Guillén, 2014, p. 656).

Other important details mentioned in the essay relate to the 2013 conflict over the Moroccan businessman and leader of the Union of Islamic Cultural Centres of Catalonia (UCICC), Noureddine Ziani, who was expelled from Spain for alleged links to radical Islamism and who was defended tooth and nail by Catalan nationalist parties. Indeed, Angel Colom, director-general of the foundation 'Nous Catalans' (New Catalans), which is linked to the centre-right nationalist CDC party, accused the Spanish government of expelling Ziani in an attempt to curb the development of a "Catalan Islam" (VilaWeb, 2013). All this has to be understood in the context of the emergence of the Catalan independence movement, which was interested in attracting new voices to its project. Now that this process has come to an end or is in a very different phase, it would be useful to know to what extent the relationship between Catalan nationalism and Islam has changed.

To explore the case from the Spanish perspective, it is important to read *Religious Governance and the Accommodation of Islam in Contemporary Spain*, published by Avi Astor in the 40th edition of the *Contemporary Spain, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. The article digs into the recent history of relations between the Spanish government and the Muslim community, starting from the paradoxical moment in which Islam was institutionally recognised as a "deeply rooted" religion (Astor, 2014, p. 1721), even if it remained socially regarded as an unfamiliar practice mostly linked to immigrants (Moreras, 2002). It also talks about the efforts of the Spanish political elites to promote a discourse based on the idea that the country is a "meeting point" of cultures, beliefs and religions (Cortes Generales, 1992). This optimistic approach, which was responsible for the construction of the first large mosques in Spain, such as the Saudi-funded one inaugurated in Madrid in 1992, ended dramatically at the beginning of the new century, when immigration from Muslim-majority countries, especially Morocco, increased considerably and public opinion changed its view of Islam as a result of the Madrid bombings of 2004 (Astor, 2014).

Another interesting perspective from the Spanish case is offered by José Luis Llaquet de Entrambasaguas in *El Islam Invertebrado en Cataluña: Un Anclaje Problemático*, an article that to some extent updates the information presented by Jordi Moreras in 2008 by explaining the evolution of the existing Islamic entities in Spain after the structural reform of 2016 and the progress of the CICC in its work within the Muslim community of this autonomous community. As Moreras predicted, the CICC has grown in strength and importance over the last decade, consolidating its position as one of the main interlocutors of the Generalitat's General Directorate of Religious Affairs (DGAR). This reality coincides with the steady improvement in relations between the Catalan government and Morocco, which has materialised in the signing of the Catalonia-Morocco Plan 2014-2017 and the creation of an optional subject in Arabic language and Moroccan culture in some Catalan high schools. The fact that this article was written at the height of the failed Catalan independence process explains Llaquet's interest in exploring the implications of this alliance in the event of an independent Catalonia, which seemed possible at the time.

This is the origin of the title of the article, a reference to *España Invertebrada*, a book in which the philosopher Ortega y Gasset analysed Spain's identity crisis following the loss of its overseas colonies at the end of the 19th century and warned of the risk of implosion caused by the rise of peripheral nationalisms. On this basis, Llaquet attempts to compare the threat of Catalan independence with the growing fear of Islam among some citizens of a country that is moving further and further away from the religious unanimity that once seemed to define it. But as the author points out in the opening pages of the article, what is now Spain was for more than seven hundred years a territory heavily influenced by Islam.

In the case of Catalonia, the influence is reduced by almost half, with only four centuries of Muslim influence—from the arrival of the Arabs in 712 to the fall of the emirate of Xibrana

in 1153—although it also left a deep mark on the region. This has led to Islam being considered a "deeply rooted" religion, which in turn makes it so unpopular with those who see the so-called *Reconquista*, which ended in 1492, as one of the pillars of Spanish identity (De Entrambasaguas, 2019).

From a European perspective, it is interesting to read *A Southern European Exceptionalism? Opening the Debate*, an article by Tina Magazzini, Marina Eleftheriadou and Anna Triandafyllidou in *The Non-radicalisation of Muslims in Southern Europe*. This article analyses the presence of Islam in Spain, Greece, and Italy, Southern European countries that share a similar dynamic in their relationship with Islam. Unlike Germany, France, or Belgium, the second generation of Muslim citizens in these countries is still small, and the presence of Islam is not yet a central issue in the political debate. Despite the fact that Spain has been the scene of two major terrorist attacks this century—Madrid in 2004 and Barcelona in 2017—the authors argue that the Spanish state and society have not followed the pattern of the rise of a xenophobic and Islamophobic right-wing political presence that can be seen in countries like Germany or France (Magazzini et al., 2024).

This is why the authors conclude that the governments of Italy, Greece, and Spain have a second chance to accommodate Islam and stop the potential radicalisation that exists in other countries. This encouraging statement contrasts with the Catalan case, which is not mentioned in the article and whose dynamics are perhaps more similar to those observed in the Netherlands or Belgium.

1.4. Rationale of the Research

As Griera points out in her essay on religious governance in Catalonia, the academic literature on the governance of religious diversity has focused primarily on state-level policies, while the role of regional governments has received much less attention (Griera, 2016). This means that while there are many articles on the governance of Islam in Spain, there is less literature on the Catalan case. Despite the existence of an exhaustive essay on the presence of Islam in Catalonia, written by Jordi Moreras in 2008, the passage of time and the significant increase in the number of Muslims in this autonomous community make it necessary to constantly update the study of this phenomenon.

This gap is not filled by either Griera or Llaquet, who focus their studies on the relationship between the religious leadership in Catalonia and the independence movement, an issue that has lost importance after the 2017 referendum, opening the door to a new political scene that still needs to be explored. An in-depth study of the influence of Moroccan diaspora politics in Catalonia is still lacking, as is one that focuses on comparing the presence of Islam in Catalonia with other European territories with a similar percentage of Muslim citizens.

According to Avi Astror, when designing frameworks for religious governance, public actors often look to other national contexts, a choice that is often made according to religious, cultural, linguistic, and historical connections (Astor, 2014). Thus, in his essay *Religious Governance and the Accommodation of Islam in Contemporary Spain*, he points to the influence of the Anglo-Saxon model in the anti-Islamophobic policies implemented by the Barcelona City Council in recent years. But is it realistic to find examples in a political world that has deep differences with the Catalan political culture?

One might think that there are other models within the European continent that could be more interesting for Catalan politicians to understand the challenges and opportunities of

accommodating Islam in Catalonia. Taking into account the number of inhabitants in this region—8 million—, the percentage of Muslim citizens—8.2%—, the country of origin of most of them—Morocco—, and the existence of a political landscape with two distinct and often competing linguistic communities—Catalan and Spanish—, it is surprising that no study of Islam in Catalonia has used the Belgian case to develop a comparative case study. A country with two strong and opposing linguistic communities—Flemish and French speaking—a population of 12 million inhabitants, and 7.6% Muslim citizens—many of whom are of Moroccan origin—is a very interesting example to understand the path that the Catalan administration should or should not take in the coming years in order to achieve successful accommodation of Islam in the region, or, as Jordi Moreras defends it, the birth of a "completely Catalan Islam" (Moreras, 2008, p. 100).

1.5. Methodology

“What are the key challenges and opportunities for accommodating Islam in Catalonia?” is a question that needs to be answered through qualitative research, i.e., the kind of research that “seeks to reveal the essence of human existence by delving into the intricacies of culture, society, and individual lives" and not to reduce it "to mere quantifiable data" (Gautam & Gautam, 2023, p. 149). Since it refers to a specific case, that of the accommodation of Islam in Catalonia, it is appropriate to use what is known as a ‘qualitative case study.’ But what does this mean? In the third edition of The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, Robert E. Stake states that a case study is not merely a methodological choice but a decision about the object of study itself (Stake, 2005). Based on this, the author divides what is known as a 'case study' into three categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective, explaining that the

first one refers to case studies that are not selected to exemplify a specific trend or problem, but rather because they are intrinsically interesting.

Given the interest of the topic, for the reasons explained in the first section of this chapter, the temptation to construct this thesis as a 'qualitative intrinsic case study' was huge. For this reason, an initial idea was to work on an updated version of what Jordi Moreras did in 2008 with his study on Muslims in Catalonia. But the existence of the Belgian case, its similarities to the Catalan one, and the existence of an extensive literature about it made more attractive the possibility of adopting the methodology known as the 'qualitative comparative case study.' This is a research method that examines a social phenomenon through two or more cases with the aim of exploring patterns, similarities, and differences between them (Mills et al., 2006). As C.G. Knight points out, a case study contains unique elements that may introduce ambiguity or uncertainty in the validity of generalisations. Therefore, comparing multiple cases can help to identify these relationships more clearly and reduce potential ambiguities present in a single case (Knight, 2001).

But since, unlike Catalonia, Belgium is an independent state, it would be more appropriate to focus on one of the three federal entities that make up the country. Taking into account its various demographic dimensions and the history of its relations with the Belgian state, Flanders, with a language that for years has been deprived of official recognition and a strong nationalist movement that, on more than one occasion, has defended the idea of becoming independent, seemed the easiest case to compare with Catalonia. Given this, the goal of this thesis is to draw a comparison between the Catalan and Flemish cases, focusing on the public initiatives promoted by their respective governments to accommodate Islam, as well as to analyse the sociological tendencies present in their Muslim communities and in the rest of society.

The aim is to study different topics using different sources. For the evolution of the policies related to the accommodation of Islam, legal documents existing in the two countries will be studied, trying to highlight the similarities and the differences between the two cases. The same will be done in the case of the policies for the accommodation of Islam and the integration of Muslims in both societies, where press articles and literature will be examined with the goal of offering a general picture of the situation in both regions. In order to discover the extent to which Islamophobia has become embedded in society, the research will focus on analysing opinion polls, political programs, electoral results, and the existing literature in the field. Other phenomena will also be studied, such as the emergence of political parties representing Muslim interests, like the Fouad Ahidar team in Belgium, and the level of strength of the ties between Muslim citizens and their countries of origin.

1.6. Scope of the Study

To structure this research, the thesis will be divided into five chapters. Three of them—the second, the third, and the fourth—will be divided into five sections: 'Legal and institutional frameworks,' 'Muslim institutions,' 'Social context and challenges to integration,' 'Politicisation of Islam,' and 'Conclusions.' The second chapter will be focused on Catalonia, by exploring the competences in religious governance of this autonomous community, the names and history of the different Muslim associations that exist in the region, the difficulties that the community finds in order to integrate into the Catalan society, and the discourses and electoral results of Platform for Catalonia (PxC) and Catalan Alliance (AC), the first two parties in the Catalan political landscape that focused their discourses on migration and Islam.

The third chapter will focus instead on the case of Flanders. It will therefore begin by analysing the way in which the Flemish culturalist tradition has influenced integration

policies in this territory, different from those of French-speaking Wallonia. It will then study the composition, origin, and function of the various Muslim entities in the region, as well as the political parties influenced by Islam that have appeared in it. This will be followed by an analysis of the social, economic, and cultural disparities affecting Muslims in Flanders. Finally, a study of the evolution of Islamophobic discourses in the region will be presented, studying the changes that occurred between the emergence of the Vlaams Blok in the early 1990s and the Belgian national elections of 2024.

Under the name ‘Catalan and Flemish Islam, a comparison,’ the fourth chapter will compare, theme by theme, the two cases, with the aim of understanding what conclusions the Catalan administration can draw from the management of Islam in Flanders. Thus, every section will put into perspective the various legislative frameworks—whether national or regional—the existence or not of a fixed and defined integration model, the success or failure of initiatives focused on the institutionalisation of Islam, the data on economic, social, and political integration of Muslims in Catalonia and Flanders, and the discourses and results of the Islamophobic-orientated parties existing in these regions. This chapter will include some partial conclusions, even if not all of them.

This thesis will conclude with a final chapter entitled 'Conclusions,' which will summarise the information presented in each chapter and propose a series of policy recommendations based on the Flemish experience. These recommendations should be taken into account by Catalan politicians in the coming years if they wish to avoid an increase in social polarisation in the region and promote the successful accommodation of Islam in Catalonia.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

Even if exploring regions instead of states is a practical way to avoid what Matthias Koenig has defined as “methodological nationalism” (Koenig, 2007), i.e., the assumption that social processes unfold and operate exclusively within the boundaries of the nation-state (Astor, 2014). Focusing on the study of laws, statistics, academic literature, and political statements could bring researchers to forget about one of the most important parts of a sociological study, that of giving voice to the group of people that we are talking about. The original idea was therefore to conduct a survey similar to the one that Kaya and Kentel conducted for their comparative study of German-Turks and French-Turks, including multiple-choice questions like "How do you define yourself with regard to the following statements about your faith?" including answers like “Quite a religious person, fulfilling all the requirements of my faith," "Someone trying to fulfil religious requirements," "Faithful, but not fulfilling the religious requirements," "Someone who doesn’t really believe in faith," and "Someone who does not have faith” (Kaya & Kentel, 2005, p. 60).

Due to time and geographical constraints, as this thesis has been written in three different cities—none of them Catalan or Flemish—during a period of nine months, this survey has not been conducted. However, the job done opens the door for other researchers to use the exposed information in order to conduct similar surveys in the near future. The same can be said about the statistical data provided by studies such as *Being Muslim in the EU*, which exist for the Spanish and Belgian states as a whole but do not offer specific data on Catalonia and Flanders, something that would be interesting to work on in order to better understand the Muslim community in the region, as well as their problems, their needs, and their experiences.

That said, two of the major problems faced by this thesis should be highlighted: the absence of religious censuses in the two regions studied and the ambiguity of the concept of "Muslim," which transcends the purely religious concept to include also the descendants of immigrants coming from countries with a Muslim tradition but who do not practice this faith assiduously. Although these are remarkable pitfalls, which make any purely statistical analysis difficult, the commitment to qualitative analysis gives room to face a series of political, social, and economic issues that remain valid regardless of whether we label as Muslim someone with a progenitor of Catalan origin and another who emigrated from Morocco. In this sense, rather than as a limitation, this certain ambiguity fits in the line of what Denis de Rougemont defined as "federalist thought," a way of approaching reality that "escapes the geometrical categories of vulgar rationalism" to seek "a flexible and constantly moving balance between groups that must unite in mutual respect and not subjugate or crush each other" (Rougemont, 1947, pp. 49-60).

Chapter 2: Islam in Catalonia

Before it was Catalan, Catalonia was Muslim. Even if assuming the nationalist historical account that places the birth of the nation in the 9th century, during the reign of Guifrè el Pelos (Wimmer, 2017), before becoming the land of the Catalans, the current autonomous community of Catalonia was ruled by the Umayyad dynasty, first as part of the Umayyad Caliphate and later as the territory of the Emirate of Córdoba. Although Charlemagne's Frankish troops conquered Barcelona in 801, limiting the Muslim presence in northern Catalonia to less than a hundred years, many cities south of the Llobregat River remained under Muslim control well into the 12th century (Llaquet Entrambasaguas, 2019, p. 5). One can therefore say that Catalonia has four centuries of Muslim history, much less than other regions of Spain—where the Islamic presence lasted until 1492—but much more than most of Western Europe. However, the contemporary presence of Islam in the region is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Unlike countries such as Belgium, Germany, or France, which already had a significant Muslim population from countries such as Turkey or Algeria in the 1960s and 1970s, the presence of Islam in Spain in general and Catalonia in particular was quite limited until the transnational migrations of the 1980s and 1990s (Contreras, 2014). To understand this, it is enough to look at the evolution of the number of Muslim oratories in the region. In 1990, Catalonia had 14 centres of Islamic worship, a number that multiplied by two between 1990 and 1994 and by four between 1995 and 1999 (Garcia-Romeral, 2013). This exponential increase accelerated even more with the arrival of the new century, when we went from 139 oratories registered in 2004 to 304 in 2024 (Direcció General d'Afers Religiosos, 2023). These data, collected in the Religious Map of Catalonia published by the DGAR, coincide

with the evolution of the number of people of Muslim origin living in the autonomous community.

If in 2008 the estimated number of Muslims living in Catalonia was between 300,000 and 350,000 (Moreras, 2008), by 2024 this figure had risen to 690,000 (UCIDE, 2025). Since Article 16 of the Spanish Constitution expressly prohibits anyone from being forced to "declare their ideology, religion, or beliefs" (Bensaid, 2019, p. 32), these figures are the product of combining the data of foreign citizens from Muslim-majority countries inscribed in the various municipal registries with those provided by the Islamic communities of each Spanish province. This method, which could be problematic in the case of the inclusion of populations from countries with large Christian communities—such as Lebanon, Syria, or Egypt—is particularly useful if considering that in Catalonia the majority of the foreign population comes from Morocco, where 99% of the inhabitants are officially Muslim (CIA, 2025).

Although Moroccans top the list of foreign residents in Catalonia, with 241,179 inhabitants, the high presence of people from Colombia, Italy, Romania, China, or Honduras means that one has to move up to seventh place on the list to find the next country with a Muslim majority. That is Pakistan, which is the origin of 59,150 inhabitants of Catalonia. Further down the list are Senegal, with 26,185 immigrants; Gambia, with 16,656; Algeria, with 10,894; and Bangladesh, with 9,084 (IDESCAT, 2025). But to focus only on the immigrant population would be to forget a large part of the Catalan Muslim community, which is made up of full Spanish citizens who practice the Muslim religion or have grown up in an environment influenced by it, a group of people that the latest demographic report by the Observatorio Andalusí puts at 291,000 (UCIDE, 2025).

The aforementioned figures make Catalonia not only the Spanish autonomous community with the highest number of Muslims in absolute terms but also the one with the highest representation of Islam believers in the total population. Given that Catalonia had a population of 8,012,231 on 1 January, it could be said that 8.7% of them were of Muslim origin. Knowing this, it is important to try to understand how Catalonia, which is often considered a "stateless nation" and enjoys a high degree of autonomy (Nagel & Rixen, 2015, p. 23), has developed its policies in the field of religious governance.

2.1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks

According to Chapter 161 of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, the basic organic law under which the Catalan regional government—the *Generalitat*—operates, the Catalan administration has "exclusive power over religious entities that carry out their activities in Catalonia" (Girera, 2016, p. 19). This point of the Statute, which survived the cuts made by the Spanish High Court in 2010 (Guibernau, 2013), served to legitimise the work carried out by the Catalan government in this area since the early 2000s (Griera, 2016, p. 19), when the SRCR, the predecessor of the current DGAR, was created. However, even if authors such as Avi Astor have suggested that the efforts of Catalan public officials in the governance of religion can be understood as a way of increasing the level of self-determination of the region (Astor, 2014), one cannot talk about religious policy in Catalonia without keeping in mind the Spanish legal framework.

After the death of the dictator Francisco Franco and the approval of the 1978 Constitution, Spain became a 'non-confessional' country where ideological and religious freedoms were recognised by law (Requena, 2019). Nevertheless, it was not until 1980 that the Spanish government opened the doors to the establishment of agreements between the state and

religious denominations other than the Catholic Church. According to the Organic Law on Religious Freedom approved that year, any religious denomination with “well-known roots” in Spanish society could sign concordat-style agreements with the state (Combalía & Roca, 2010, p. 613). The ambivalence of the concept of “*notorio arraigo*,” which has also been translated as “deep roots,” allowed a committee appointed by the Advisory Commission on Religious Freedom to understand it from a historical perspective, including religious communities that had few active members in the country but were linked to Spanish history (Fernández-Coronado González, 1995). Thus, Protestantism and Judaism in 1984 and Islam in 1992 were allowed to be part of this category (Astor, 2016).

The state's need to find an interlocutor within the Muslim community to sign this agreement led to the creation, in the same year, of the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE), which united the already existing Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Organisations (FEERI) and the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE) with the aim to create a body capable of acting as the "sole interlocutor for Muslims in Spain" (Comisión Islámica de España, 2025). In the meantime, the Catalan government began to implement parallel agreements with other religious institutions. According to Griera, this attitude is justified by the necessity of "filling the vacuum" left by a Spanish government that, even if it was successful in allowing religious assistance in hospitals, did not implement most of the points present in the agreement, such as the construction of new Muslim cemeteries or the teaching of Islam in schools (Griera, 2016, p. 21). It is in this context that one has to understand the agreement signed by the Generalitat with the Islamic and Cultural Council of Catalonia (CICC), a body that was created in 2000 and was the reference organisation for Islam in the region (Moreras, 2008).

The Generalitat's policy in this area has two clear precedents. On the one hand, the Commissariat for Cults, created during the Civil War to rebuild relations between the

Republican government and the Christian community after the anticlerical incidents that occurred in the first years of the war (Solé & Albareda, 2012); on the other hand, the Office for Religious Affairs (OAR), created by the Barcelona City Council in the 1990s. This last one, whose objectives are "to guarantee the right to freedom and religion," "to promote knowledge and recognition of religious plurality in the city," and "to create spaces for participatory dialogue and positive interaction between people of different faiths" (Oficina d'Afers Religiosos, 2023), has been the most influential for the DGAR (Astor et al., 2019). In fact, the competences of this body correspond perfectly to the main objectives of the OAR by "responding to the demands of the different religious entities established in Catalonia," "preparing studies and reports on religious matters," and "establishing and maintaining relations with institutional leaders in religious matters" (Gencat, 2019).

Another of its responsibilities is to “implement the agreements between the government and the representative bodies of the different religious communities in Catalonia,” which in the case of Islam means dealing with the leaders of the CICC. Although the collaboration between the Islamic Council and the Generalitat has yielded positive results, such as the Catalan language courses for imams that have been developed since 2005 (Tarodo Soria, 2005), the Council has also been criticised by other Muslim entities. Some voices have questioned the “ideological links” between this institution and the Moroccan government (Moreras, 2008, p. 95), while others have pointed to the presence of members of the Tablighi Jamaat movement in its organisation, including its president, the Moroccan national Hasan Lahcen Saaou (Soage, 2018). This movement, which emerged in northern India around 1926 and has been labelled as particularly conservative (Noor, 2012), has been accused by Prado, president of the Catalan Islamic Council (JIC), of “calling on Muslims to maintain a distinct Islamic identity in relation to the host society” (Prado, 2008). Whether for this reason or because of the Catalan government's desire to democratise its relationship with the region's

Islamic communities, the Generalitat has been working with other bodies present in the region for the last decade.

2.2 Muslim Institutions in Catalonia

In her study of the Islamic communities present in Catalonia, Gloria García-Romera mentions up to eight different bodies, which, apart from the CICC and the FEERI, include the Union of Islamic Cultural Centres of Catalonia (UCCIC), the Union of Islamic Centres of Catalonia (UCIDCAT), the Federation of African Muslim Communities of Spain (FCMAE), the Catalan Islamic Federation of Religious Entities (FIC), the Muslim Federation of Spain (FEME), and the Federation of Islamic Groups for Coexistence in Spain (FAICE). Divided by ideology, sphere of influence, and national origin of their members, these organisations are of different importance, but they help to understand the diversity of the Islamic faith in Catalan soil (Garcia-Romeral, 2013). However, this section will focus on three of them, those that have official relations with the Generalitat.

Although the initial objective of the CICC was to incorporate all Muslim entities in the region, including Pakistani and sub-Saharan ones, eight years after its foundation, it had only agglomerated thirty oratories out of the more than 160 that existed in the region at the time (Moreras, 2008). Meanwhile, the Pakistani collective was and still is organised around *Camí de la Pau* (Path of Peace), a foundation created in 1997 that has remained independent (Garcia-Romeral, 2013). To this lack of results, one must add the results of the police operation that took place in January 2008 in the Tariq Ibn Ziyad mosque on Hospital Street in Barcelona, where, according to the report prepared by the Guardia Civil, members of an alleged terrorist cell were meeting to carry out attacks in the city (Lopez Bargados, 2009). Although Lahcen Saaou, the president of the CICC, was not among the 14 people arrested,

the fact that he was also the imam of this mosque may explain why the Generalitat soon began to consider collaborating with other Muslim organisations.

It is at this point that the other two bodies, which have so far proved to be the most influential in the governance of Islam in Catalonia, appear on the scene. They are the UCIDCAT—the Catalan branch of the Spanish UCIDE—and the UCCIC. The latter, founded in 2010 by the businessman Noureddine Ziani, gained particular notoriety in 2013 when its president was expelled from Spanish territory by the National Intelligence Centre (CNI), accused of collaborating with Moroccan intelligence (Griera, 2016). These accusations have been repeatedly denied by figures such as Angel Colom, of whom Ziani was a regular collaborator. According to Colom, the Spanish government's intention with this operation was to prevent the articulation of a "Catalan Islam" capable of establishing bilateral relations with Morocco and other countries "without being dependent on Madrid" (Vilaweb, 2013).

On the other hand, national newspapers of different ideological tendencies, such as *El País*, *La Vanguardia,* and *El Mundo*, have published articles talking about the good relations between Ziani and Mohamed Chaib, deputy of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) and member of the Moroccan Consultative Council abroad and aligned with the interests of the Moroccan monarchy, who supported Ziani in the creation of the UCCIC (Cembrero, 2013; Martín de Pozuelo, 2015; De la Cal, 2018). Whatever the truth, what is known is that before founding the UCCIC, Ziani was a member of the CICC, from which he was expelled due to disagreements with the body's leadership. It is also known that, following these events, the spokesman of the CICC, Mohamed Halhoul, explained that the decision had been taken to prevent "personal interests and the interests of other countries" from interfering with the proper functioning of the body (Playà, 2010).

If, according to these testimonies, the UCCIC is closer to the Moroccan crown, the UCIDCAT would have better relations with the Justice and Development Party (PJD), a Moroccan Islamist formation influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, which controlled the government of the country between 2011 and 2021 (Daadaoui, 2021). Although this affinity has not been publicly declared, signs of it can be found in the fact that Ayman Adlbi, now head of the CIE and former president of UCIDE, was linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in his native Syria (Cembrero, 2024), or that PJD deputies such as El Mokri El Idrissi Abouzaid have been invited to events organised by UCIDCAT (UCIDCAT, 2012). Nevertheless, beyond the political intrigues, Islam in Catalonia is, in the words of Moreras, "an Islam of oratories and not of mosques and minarets, built in concrete and not in marble (...) of community proximity and not of elite relations" (Moreras, 2008, p. 17). This statement, made seventeen years ago, is still true. To understand this, it is enough to note that, unlike other Spanish autonomous communities, Catalonia still does not have a large mosque.

Although one explanation for this reality would be the divisions between Muslim communities discussed above, another possibility could be related to the national and religious characteristics of Catalonia and their complex relationship with Islam (Zapata-Barrero & Witte, 2006).

2.3 Social context and challenges to integration

As Professor Ayan Kaya points out, the existence of Muslim institutions depends on the existence of a group of subjects condemned to remain within the boundaries of a religious community without being allowed to integrate into mainstream society (Kaya, 2009). This worldview, which can lead to the 'reminorization of minorities' (Rath, 1993), is particularly present in Spain and Catalonia, where Islam continues to be seen as an immigration

phenomenon (Moreras, 2008). An example of that approach can be exemplified by the fact that in the surveys commissioned by the Spanish government between 2006 and 2010 on "the beliefs and attitudes of Muslims living in Spain," only immigrants were interviewed (Soage, 2018, p. 9). That fact is quite significant, considering that at that time, 30% of Muslims in the country already had Spanish nationality (UCIDE, 2010), and now this figure has risen to 45% in Spain and 42% in Catalonia (UCIDE, 2025).

If Islam is the religion of many Catalan citizens, why can't this community have a large mosque, or at least a purpose-built one? Although some scholars consider the construction of an Islamic temple of reference as a necessary measure to facilitate the integration of Muslims in the region, implying that it is also part of their culture (De la Calle, 2004), the fact that Catalonia is the most secularised region in Spain must be taken into account (Pérez-Agote, 2012). Some suggest that this condition has made it easier for Catalonia to embrace religious diversity as a way of distancing itself from a Spain that is seen as more conservative and Catholic (Burchardt, 2017), but the high secularisation of Catalonia could also work against the public visibility of Islam. The fact that the reduction of Catholicism to the private or folkloric sphere has been accompanied by demands for greater visibility of Islam could be a source of conflict with Catalan secular values (Zapata-Barrero & de Witte, 2006). However, other voices have pointed out that one of the main sources of opposition to the public visibility of Islam could be linked to the alleged threat that Islam could pose to Catalan identity (Astor, 2010).

In the early 2000s, 60% of the population of Catalonia came from an immigrant family. This statistical truth is the result of the massive migrations of workers from other parts of Spain before and after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), which contributed to the net immigration of more than two million people to the region between 1901 and 1970 (Zapata-Barrero &

Wenden, 2011). These figures must be understood in the context of a society that, despite being called ‘terra de pas’ (‘land of passage’) by contemporary historians, was, until the beginning of the 20th century, largely monolingual, i.e., made up of people whose only language was Catalan and who, in more than 50% of cases, did not know how to speak Spanish, despite its official status throughout the state (Rosselló et al., 2020). Although the history of the Spanification of the population of Catalonia is little studied, the aforementioned migratory phenomena had a particular importance in its consolidation (Fuster & Ocerinjauregui, 2014).

The fall of the Franco dictatorship, the end of the policy of legal discrimination against any language other than Spanish, and the re-establishment of an autonomous Catalan government in 1979, under the control of the nationalist Convergence and Union (CiU) party from 1980 onwards, allowed the implementation of a language immersion program based on teaching Spanish-speaking students entirely in Catalan (Arenas & Muset, 2007). While this project began to be developed in all the schools of the autonomous community, Catalonia experienced a new wave of migration, which meant that between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of non-Spanish immigrants in the territory increased from 2.9% to 16% (Brugué et al., 2013). These percentages, which are comparable to those of other Western European countries, were, however, acquired at a much faster rate. While the rest of the countries with a 10% immigrant population reached this figure through a process that lasted almost half a century, Catalonia acquired this percentage in little more than a decade (Rodon & Franco-Guillen, 2014).

This situation has been accompanied by a decline in the use of Catalan, which is now the first language of only 32.6% of the population (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023), and threatens to activate the fear of cultural undermining and division that, on certain occasions, affects

“stateless nations” and the parties that represent their interests (Jeram et al., 2015, p. 1231). Although CiU has always promoted a civic nation-building project, with a president who insisted that “everyone who lives and works in Catalonia and has the desire to do so is Catalan” (Hepburn, 2009, p. 519), this position has begun to change in recent years with the emergence of anti-immigration parties such as first Platform for Catalonia (PxC) and later Catalan Alliance (AC).

2.4. The politicisation of Islam in Catalonia

In the last elections to the Catalan parliament, AC received 119,149 votes, making it the eighth most popular list among Catalans, with 3.77% of the vote (Gencat, 2024). Its entry into the regional chamber was a clear novelty, as it was the first time that a formation combining Catalan nationalism with openly anti-immigration proposals had achieved such a success. Despite the fact that its election manifesto places great emphasis on the need to curb immigration, appealing to economic arguments and reiterating that "not everyone fits in Catalonia" (Aliança Catalana, 2024, p. 2), the speeches of its leader, Silvia Orriols, have repeatedly targeted the region's Muslim community, using terms such as "reconquest" to refer to its political action against those it considers invaders (Sagrera Torres, 2024, p. 5). Orriols, who has openly declared herself to be an "Islamophobe" (Orriols, 2023), rose to prominence in 2019 when she became a councillor in the Ripoll City Council. She did so two years after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, carried out in August 2017 by nine young citizens of Moroccan descent who were radicalised by the imam of this town of around 11,000 inhabitants (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2022).

The trauma caused by this incident was exacerbated by the fact that the council decided to allow a speech by the sister of one of the terrorists during the tributes to the victims, which

focused more on warning of the dangers of Islamophobia than on those of radical Islamism. Despite the fact that this political mistake helped Orriols in his media promotion, the political scientist Xavier Torrens considers that the anti-immigration positions were already well established in Ripoll. In fact, despite being the county capital with the lowest percentage of foreign residents, the city already had a councillor from the PxC in 2011, a formation that also focused on the rejection of immigration in general and Muslims in particular (Torrens, 2024). In contrast to Orriols, a staunch defender of Catalan independence and the restoration of pre-1714 laws—the year in which the union of the then Crown of Aragon with the Kingdom of Castile was consolidated and Spanish was made the official language—(Diari de Girona, 2019), PxC was founded by Josep Anglada, a former member of New Force (FN), a Francoist party founded by the fascist leader Blas Piñar after the end of the Franco regime and known for its absolute opposition to Catalan culture (Guedioura, 2012).

This circumstance did not prevent Anglada from counting on great support in places with a Catalan-speaking majority and traditionally associated with Catalan nationalism, such as Cervera, El Vendrell, or Vic, where he obtained 15.9%, 17.7%, and 18.5% of the vote, respectively, in 2007 (Guedioura, 2012). This achievement was reached by avoiding any reference to the unity or rupture of Spain (Hernández-Carr, 2013) and by proposing a new axis of national identification that would overcome the differences between Spain and Catalonia and focus on the division between natives and foreigners (Casals, 2006). Such a method, which was later used on a large scale by Matteo Salvini in his transformation of the separatist Northern League into a national party (Albertazzi et al., 2018), proved quite useful until the emergence of the Catalan independence movement at the centre of the regional political debate from 2012 onwards. It was then that the PxC, which had won 75,000 votes across the Catalan territory in 2010, began the process of decline that would eventually lead to its fragmentation and subsequent disappearance in 2019 (Faus, 2019).

However, even before the electoral rise of PxC, there was opposition to Islam from certain sectors of Catalan society. An example of this is the racist riots in the city of Terrassa in 1999, which was the first large-scale violent attack against the immigrant population in Spain as a whole during the 20th century (Moreras, 2008). Since then, there have been more than 30 cities where the proposal to open a mosque has been met with strong protests from neighbours. These types of incidents, which have taken place all over Catalonia, have made this autonomous community the Spanish region with the highest level of opposition to the construction of Islamic temples. However, although the possible influence of the existential fears of the Catalan nation in its opposition to Islam has already been mentioned, most of the protests against the opening of new mosques have taken place in predominantly Spanish-speaking neighbourhoods, where Catalan is not usually used beyond the administrative sphere (Astor, 2010). So what else lies behind the tense relationship between Catalonia and Islam?

As Astor explains in his work on the opposition to the construction of mosques in Catalonia, it is important to take into account the socio-economic factor that has in most cases led Muslim immigrants and their descendants to live in traditionally disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where the opening of a mosque is perceived as another step in a process of "ghettoisation" (Astor, 2010, p. 19). However unfounded this fear may be, its existence reminds us that, as Moreras stated in 2008, the tendency to think that if one can guarantee the recognition of Islam as a religion, it will also guarantee the social integration of Muslim groups "is a serious mistake" (Moreras, 2008, p. 11). Despite the Generalitat's work to institutionalise Catalan Islam, it is worth noting that 27% of men of Moroccan origin are unemployed, a figure that rises to 54% for women (INE, 2025).

2.5. Conclusions

Despite the fact that the Muslim presence in Catalonia predates its existence as a nation and that today its figures are very similar to those of other European countries, in this autonomous community Islam continues to be understood as something linked to the phenomenon of migration, i.e., something to be managed in accordance with the authorities of the countries of origin of its citizens of Muslim faith. This does not detract from the fact that the Catalan government, in its attempt to distance itself from the Spanish authorities, has made some successful advances to accommodate Islam in Catalonia. However, the lack of a clear interlocutor and the existing political struggles between the different Muslim entities in the country need to be addressed to make the work of the DGAR more effective.

This work is particularly necessary in a context in which the traditional affinity of Catalan nationalism with religious diversity seems to be breaking down, leading to the growth of Islamophobic positions that have different origins—national, religious, and socio-economic—but only one consequence: the polarisation of society. Given all this, it is necessary to look beyond Catalonia's borders to find an illustrative example able to show the path that the region should follow in terms of religious governance to avoid aggravating an increasingly likely conflict.

Chapter 3: Islam in Flanders

The first documented traces of Muslim presence in Flanders date back to 1829, one year prior to the establishment of the Belgian state. At that time, the Ottoman consul in Antwerp—then part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands—noted in an official report the presence of approximately 6,000 individuals from the Islamic world residing in the port city (Panafit, 1999). Nevertheless, the Muslim presence in the region remained largely anecdotal until the 1960s, when the Belgian government signed a series of bilateral agreements with Tunisia, Algeria, and Turkey to recruit low-skilled workers for the steel and coal mining sectors (Fadil et al., 2014). These agreements—similar to those concluded with Francoist Spain and Greece in the late 1950s—are often interpreted as a strategic response by Belgian authorities to Italy's refusal to continue allowing labour recruitment following the 1956 Marcinelle mining disaster, which claimed the lives of 132 Italian workers (Barrio, 2006). In this context, the Belgian government shifted its focus toward countries deemed less concerned about the welfare of their expatriate populations.

Since then, the Muslim population in Flanders in particular, and in Belgium more broadly, has steadily increased. Although there are no official national statistics on the matter, *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam* estimated in 2014 that there were approximately 500,000 Muslims residing in Belgium (Fadil et al., 2014). A more recent study by the Pew Research Center estimated the Muslim population at 870,000 in 2017, representing 7.6% of the total population, regardless of individual levels of religiosity (Hackett et al., 2017). These discrepancies illustrate the variability of estimates depending on methodology and definition. The figures diverge even further when examined at the regional level. A 2023 report by the U.S. Department of State, drawing on independent research by sociologist Jan Hertogen,

indicates that while the proportion of Muslims is lower in some parts of the country, it reaches 24.2% in Brussels and 7.5% in Antwerp (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

According to Jan Hertogen's statistical portal, Muslims represent approximately 5.1% of the population in the Flanders region. However, the absence of peer-reviewed validation for his data necessitates the use of alternative methods to produce academically robust estimates of the Muslim population in the region under study. Drawing on methodologies similar to those employed by the Observatorio Andalusí (UCIDE, 2025) and by Moreras in his study on Muslims in Catalonia (Moreras, 2008), it is possible to estimate that the number of individuals of Muslim culture or origin in Flanders ranges between 280,000 and 370,000, representing between 4.1% and 5.4% of the region's 6,822,000 inhabitants (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2023). These figures result from the combination of approximately 55,000 officially registered Turkish and Moroccan nationals residing in the region (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2023) and 38% of the 580,000 individuals born abroad who have acquired Belgian nationality (Statbel, 2024).

The estimate of 38% is derived from the proportion of individuals originating from Muslim-majority countries among the 160,000 who acquired Belgian nationality while residing in Flanders between 2000 and 2023 (Statbel, 2024). Reaching the upper bound of 370,000 depends on whether the same 38% is also applied to the roughly 250,000 Flemish residents with two foreign-born parents (Statbel, 2024). This estimate does not account for Belgian converts to Islam, who were estimated at around 15,000 nationwide in 2007 (Bousetta & Bernes, 2007), nor does it include individuals with only one foreign-born parent. Nevertheless, beyond providing a relatively comprehensive frame of reference, this statistical approximation underscores the complexity of obtaining precise and academically reliable data on the composition of the Muslim population in the region.

In addition to these methodological challenges, the case of Brussels must be considered. Although geographically and administratively separate from Flanders, Brussels functions as the political capital of the Flemish Region (Boussauw et al., 2018). Despite this institutional *rara avis*, the principal issue with including Brussels in regional analyses lies in its distinct demographic dynamics—particularly its Muslim population, which accounts for approximately 24% of the total (Mekki-Berrada & d'Haenens, 2023)—that will distort significantly the results of any statistical overview of Muslims in Flanders. Beyond its similarities with Barcelona, based on a similar history of linguistic substitution and its symbolic function as a perceived site of identity loss for regional nationalist movements (Lagrou, 2000), the present study will focus exclusively on the Muslim population residing within the territorial boundaries of the Flemish Region. To this end, and in light of Belgium's complex federal structure—established through the 1993 state reform (Reuchamps, 2013)—it is essential to begin by analysing the legal framework that governs the accommodation of Islam in Flanders.

3.1 Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Just as Belgium is characterised by deep political and linguistic divisions, these fractures also extend to the realm of the integration of minorities, which has been approached through markedly different ideological frameworks. While Wallonia tends to align with the French republican model—emphasising acculturation as the normative goal—Flanders, following the example of the Netherlands, draws inspiration from the German culturalist tradition (Kaya, 2009). In this latter approach, immigrants and their descendants are often perceived not as individuals expected to internalise and adopt the customs of the host society but as members of enduring cultural communities—*Volksgemeinschaft*—defined in ethnocultural rather than

political terms. This perspective, rooted in the romantic ideals of the *Aufklärung* and influential in German-speaking contexts, upholds the notion that all cultures possess equal intrinsic value. Thus, this perspective stands in opposition to the French civilisational model, which is predicated on the belief in a superior host culture that newcomers are expected to embrace and embody (Brubaker, 1992).

Despite the divergent political traditions of Belgium's two main federal regions, both Flanders and Wallonia have developed their minority integration policies within the institutional framework established by the Royal Commissariat for Migrant Policies (RCMP) and the Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight against Racism (CEOFR), created by the federal government in 1989 and 1993, respectively (Bousetta et al., 2005). This apparent policy coordination lends credence to the arguments of scholars who posit the existence of a distinct Belgian model of religious governance—one that contrasts with the French *laïcité* and emphasises the principle of state neutrality (Fadil et al., 2014). This interpretation is further supported by the content of Articles 21 and 181 of the Belgian Constitution, which assert that "the State shall not interfere in the appointment or installation of ministers of any religion" and that it is responsible for covering "the salaries and pensions of ministers of religion" (Belgian Constitution, 1831).

This logic of coordinated institutional action can also be observed in the efforts to institutionalise Islam in Belgium, which began in the 1990s, when the federal government promoted the creation of a representative body of Muslims—elected by members of the faith—to serve as an official interlocutor with the state (Kaya, 2009). Notably, Belgium became the first European country to recognise Islam as an official religion in 1974 (Dalmia, 2020). This recognition laid the groundwork for the historic 1998 elections to a Muslim representative body—the first of their kind on the continent—which saw approximately

70,000 registered voters and 264 candidates (Renaerts, 1999). These elections were the outcome of a complex negotiation process that began in 1993 and involved various Islamic associations, the CEOFR, and the Ministry of Justice. Central to the negotiations were disagreements over the profile of eligible candidates: while the government advocated for the inclusion of more liberal figures among them, many religious organisations insisted on unrestricted freedom of choice (Kaya, 2009).

Thus, in 1999, the Executive of Belgian Muslims (EMB) was established as the official representative body for the country's Muslim population. However, the division of its members into ethnic categories—"Turks," "Moroccans," "converts," and "others"—has posed big challenges to its functioning and legitimacy (Zemni, 2011, p. 34). Initially tasked with overseeing religious education, mosque subsidies, and imam salaries (Kaya, 2009), the EMB reached the peak of its institutional influence in 2018. It was that year when the Belgian government transferred to the EMB the administration of the Grand Mosque of Brussels, which had been under Saudi control since 1969 (Reuters, 2018). Despite this success, in 2022 the Ministry of Justice revoked the EMB's status as the official representative of Belgian Muslims. Citing concerns about lack of transparency and alleged foreign influence, Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne decided to create a substitutive body under the name of the Muslim Council of Belgium. However, this new institution has struggled to gain legitimacy, with the Turkish Belgian community being especially reluctant to it (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Meanwhile, the Flemish government has continued to pursue a parallel policy centred on the promotion of self-managed organizations created by migrants and minority religious communities. This approach forms part of a broader multicultural strategy that includes measures such as renaming the migrant origin population as "ethnocultural minorities,"

recognizing the right to school absences on Muslim religious holidays, and establishing a Forum of Minorities (Jeram & Adam, 2014, p. 251). Since 2004, however, the regional government has also implemented compulsory integration programs (*inburgeringstrajecten*) for newly arrived immigrants, aimed at fostering knowledge of Flemish social norms and common values. While this shift reflects a more assimilationist orientation —closer in spirit to Walloon and French models— it has not led to the abandonment of Flanders' broader culturalist framework (Jacobs, 2004, p. 287). Although some scholars have highlighted the introduction of mandatory citizenship education in secondary schools from 2018 onward as a significant step in this direction (Loobuyck, 2020), the long-term impact of this policy shift remains to be thoroughly assessed.

3.2 Muslim Institutions in Flanders

The institutional presence of Muslims in Flanders dates back to the arrival of the first workers from Muslim-majority countries. However, it is important to note that, for a long period, due to the migrant origins of Belgian Muslims, Islam was perceived both in Flanders and across the country as a foreign phenomenon (Fadil et al., 2014). This perception helps explain why, during negotiations for the recognition of Islam as an official religion and the establishment of the Islamic and Cultural Centre—which served as the primary Muslim interlocutor with the Belgian government until the late 1990s—countries such as Saudi Arabia wielded much more influence than the local Muslim community itself (Kanmaz, 2002). In this context, it is noteworthy that the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet), through the Turkish Islamic Foundation of Belgium, oversees a total of 62 mosques across the country. Additionally, the Islamic Federation of Belgium, which is influenced by the Turkish Islamist ideology Millî Görüş and controls 30 other mosques, further underscores the extent to which

Muslim entities in Belgium and Flanders have been historically perceived as shaped by foreign political interests (Yanasmayan, 2010).

However, of the 162 operating mosques in Flanders, at least 26 receive financial support from the regional government. According to a law passed by the Flemish parliament in 2021, all of these mosques are obliged to renounce any monetary aid from foreign countries (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Despite what is stated in Article 181 of the Constitution, financing of mosques by the various regions did not begin until 2007, suggesting that it was not the Flemish government's highest priority in its relationship with Islam until very recently (Ettourki & Khoojinian, 2017). Nevertheless, the Flemish executive has promoted initiatives such as the creation of the Expert Centre for Islamic Cultures in Flanders, which aims to collect and disseminate knowledge about Islam to inform social debate (Ettourki, 2019). Even so, these initiatives—which involved members of the Islamic community as well as liberal and Christian groups—should not distract the reader from the broader reality: the existence of a mosaic of cultural, sporting, and charitable associations aimed at the Muslim community and financially supported by the regional government.

Many of these organisations are listed in the *Stafkaart van het migrantenmiddenveld en zijn erfgoed in Vlaanderen en Brussel*, a digital map created by KADOC-KU Leuven and Amsab-Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis. The map includes 834 organisations created by people of immigrant origin, all catalogued in an ODIS database (MigrantenErfgoed, 2014). Although the database is undergoing maintenance at the time of writing this thesis, it is worthwhile to mention some key entities operating across the Flemish region. One such example is Kif Kif, a sociocultural organisation committed to combating discrimination. Founded in 2001 by Belgian publicist of Moroccan descent Tarik Fraihi, Kif Kif has organised a variety of initiatives, including a short-lived talent show aimed at promoting the

skills of young people from ethnic minorities. The organisation also hosts literary competitions and supports a range of cultural activities in Antwerp, with financial backing from the Flemish Ministry of Culture as part of the Action Plan for Interculturalism (Saeys et al., 2014).

Another noteworthy organisation is the Flemish Coordination Centre for Minority Girls and Women, established in 2000 to provide consultancy and education on issues affecting women from minority groups. Since 2010, it has operated under the name Ella. While the organisation primarily engages with Muslim women, it also addresses the concerns of Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities (Van Es & Van den Brandt, 2020). Both Ella and Kif Kif exemplify entities that are not aligned with a specific national origin, which is notable given the prominent roles played by umbrella organisations such as the Federation of Moroccan Associations (FMV) and the Union of Turkish Associations (UTV), which coordinate civil entities tied to their respective national communities (Ettourki, 2017). This form of ethnic segmentation—already observed in the structure of the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium—is, however, less evident in the country's Muslim political entities. While a more detailed discussion of the politicisation of Islam will follow, it is worth noting that these Muslim-orientated political parties occupy a hybrid position: although they participate in elections, they also serve broader social and representative functions for the community.

The history of Muslim parties in Belgium dates back to 1999, when Redouane Ahrouch attempted to bring together different conservative Islamic groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to form the Noor party (Riaño, 2014). Despite poor results in the 2003 elections, in which it gained little more than 1,000 votes, other Islamist parties emerged in subsequent years, such as the Citizenship and Prosperity Party and the Young Muslim Party (Riaño, 2014). However, it was not until 2012 that the ISLAM party, also founded by

Ahrouch, gained representation in the municipalities of Molenbeek and Anderlecht by appealing to the discrimination experienced by its citizens at the hands of Belgian society (Riaño, 2014). Similarly, although not strictly religious, Team Fouad Ahidar has had a seat in the Flemish parliament since 2024 as well as three in the Brussels regional parliament (IBZ, 2024). Founded by Fouad Ahidar, a former member of the Flemish socialist party *Vooruit*, the formation combines a discourse focused on social issues, such as housing prices, with identity issues, such as opposition to the prohibition of Islamic ritual slaughter and the wearing of the veil in public administration (De Marneffe, 2024). However, to understand this party's success and its ability to appeal to certain voters, it is necessary to consider the social context of the community that has become its main target.

3.3 Social context and challenges to integration

In 2023, the Flemish region had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the European Union. With just 3.3% of the population unemployed, only the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany had healthier labour markets. However, these figures worsen considerably when the nationality of origin of the workers is considered. While unemployment among the Belgian-born population was limited to 2.9%, it reached 7.1% among those born outside the EU (Vlaamse Overheid, 2023). Even if not particularly positive, this data is better than that of 2005, when the unemployment rate of the Muslim community in the region was six times the regional average (Kaya, 2009). This evolution might lead one to think that Flemish Muslims are relatively well integrated in socio-economic terms or, at least, better than before.

In Belgium as a whole, where there is more specific data on the country of origin of workers, the average unemployment rate is 5.6%, rising to 16.4% and 10% among the people coming from North Africa and candidate countries for accession to the European Union—i.e.,

Turkey—which is well above the rate of 3.8% for those born in Belgium (Statbel, 2024). It should be noted that, in both cases, unemployment figures among the migrant population have fallen. However, this evidence does not contradict the fact that Muslims are over-represented in precarious and low-paid jobs (Kaya, 2009), nor does it negate the difficulty faced by women wearing a hijab in finding employment (Van Raemdonck, 2023). Nevertheless, it is also true that community members are increasingly present in positions of power. For example, between 1999 and 2009, the number of parliamentarians of Muslim origin in the Brussels Parliament increased from nine to 20, accounting for 22.5% of the seats in the hemicycle (Zibouh, 2013).

These positive data contrast with those relating to the field of education. According to the 2018 Barometer of Educational Diversity in Flanders, published by the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities, children with parents from non-EU countries, primarily from Turkey or North Africa, are three times more likely to finish their schooling without obtaining a secondary education qualification. The situation is even more dramatic for girls of Turkish origin, with a school failure rate of 43% (Interfederaal Gelijkekansencentrum, 2018). In the face of such figures, which are sometimes accompanied by data on crime and poverty, academics such as Zemni have noted two radically different interpretations emerging: one that blames Islam for all these problems, and another that attributes them to the social and economic conditions Belgian Muslims have inherited from their migrant ancestors (Zemni, 2011).

Assuming the second option is correct and equal opportunities in education and employment are more important to Belgian Muslims than issues such as wearing the veil, it is important to note that this kind of identitarian debate has been the focus of the political discourse about the Muslim community in Belgium (Brems, 2020). In June 2017, for instance, the Flemish

parliament voted in favour of a law prohibiting Islamic ritual slaughter. Presumably based on animal rights concerns, this initiative was added to existing bans on wearing the hijab in public administration in cities such as Antwerp, Sint-Niklaas and Ninove (Brems, 2020). While authors such as Brown have identified such initiatives as indicative of an Islamophobic political tendency that seeks to racialise and ethnicise citizens of immigrant origin (Brown, 2006), others, such as Balibar (2004), have argued that the ultimate objective is to blame the descendants of immigrants for their exclusion and poverty. It is also noteworthy that groups such as Team Fouad Ahidar have made these issues central to their political programme (De Marneffe, 2024).

This commitment to the identity and distinctive features of the Muslim community encompasses not only the hijab and ritual sacrifice but also a clear focus on defending the Palestinian cause. In pursuit of this goal, Ahidar joined forces with the Union of Muslim Democrats of France and the Dutch NIDA to form the Free Palestine Party and run in the European Parliament elections (Sugy, 2024). While the party did not secure any seats, its existence supports the theories of Alistair MacIntyre and Robert Young regarding Islam's role as a “counter-hegemonic global political movement” that encourages Muslims to advocate for justice and oppose tyranny (Kaya, 2009, p. 178). While this idea aligns with John L. Esposito's views on Islam's potential to replace Marxism-Leninism in opposition to the Western order (Esposito, 1992), it faces numerical challenges. These challenges stem from the individualisation of faith, as observed by Kaya in his essay on Islam's integration in Europe (Kaya, 2009), and the fact that 90% of European Muslims do not engage with any political Islamic entities (Boubekeur, 2007). Nevertheless, debates about Islam have gained significant momentum in the Flemish public sphere.

3.4 The politicisation of Islam in Flanders

At first, the history of cultural discrimination experienced by Dutch-speaking Belgians at the hands of the French-speaking political elite led Flemish leaders to empathise with the situation of the region's Muslim community. For instance, in 1982, the Christian Democrat minister Rika Steyaert publicly declared that "the Flemish people, who have fought hard for their own identity, cannot but sympathise with immigrants' similar endeavours in mutual respect" (Jeram & Adam, 2014, p. 251). However, although certain aspects of this vision have been maintained over time, as evidenced by the aforementioned policy of promoting diverse cultural entities, the relationship between Flemish policy and Muslims has deteriorated over the last few decades. As early as 1989, Paula D'Hondt, president of the Royal Commission on Migration Policy, published a policy report in which she first warned of the need to adopt assimilationist policies to curb the rise of the Flemish Block (VB), a far-right, anti-immigration party gaining popularity at the time (Zemni, 2011).

In contrast to the Netherlands, where Islam only became a political issue after 9/11 and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh in 2002 and 2004, respectively, the Muslim question was a key issue in the 1991 general election. The VB increased its number of seats from two to twelve and won 6.6% of the vote (Zemni, 2011). Founded in 1978 by a group of Flemish nationalists who advocated the secession of Flanders from Belgium, the party gained popularity by making immigration a central plank of its political agenda, enabling it to perform well in cities with the highest Muslim populations. In Antwerp, the most populous city in Flanders, the VB reached 33 per cent of the vote in the 2000 municipal elections (Fisher, 2001). By 2004, when the Belgian Court of Cassation ruled that the VB was in breach of the federal anti-racism law and forced its dissolution, the party had already

become the most voted formation in the Flemish Parliament, gaining the support of one in four Flemish voters (Erk, 2005).

Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), the party that replaced the VB, has been forced to temper its views on migrants. It now only states that it proposes the "repatriation of those who reject, deny or combat our culture and certain European values such as separation of church and state, liberty of expression, and equality between men and women", without mentioning the word "Muslims" (Erk, 2005, p. 495). Despite the existing *cordon sanitaire* and the loss of popular support it experienced prior to its resurgence in the 2019 elections, the party's political positions have influenced the immigration discourse of other Flemish parties (Biard, 2020). This influence is particularly evident in the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a nationalist party that has adopted some of the VB's proposals on immigration. However, the paradigm shift towards a more interventionist model in Flemish schools, emphasising concepts such as "citizenship education", was initiated in the 2010s by the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), which, due to their tradition of defending the Catholic school, were so far not very favourable to state intervention in education (Loobuyck, 2020, p. 70).

It is worth noting that Islam emerged in the Flemish public debate before both the 2016 terrorist attacks and the rise of radical political movements such as the Arab European League and Sharia4Belgium, which were established in 2003 and 2010, respectively (Teich, 2016). Similar trends can be observed in other Western countries, where relations between the Islamic and Western worlds were largely considered a risk for the latter even before the emergence of the Islamic State and episodes of young European Muslims going to fight in Syria (WEF, 2008). However, it is necessary to understand the particularities of the Flemish case. As a stateless nation, the Flemish electorate's rejection of immigrants could be explained by a combination of two fears: internal and external minoritisation. While the

former has been identified as a key driver of any nationalism (Arel, 2001), the impact of the fear of diminished importance within the broader national context of the regional cultures is often overlooked (Lipton, 2012).

The Frenchification of Brussels, a city that was traditionally Dutch-speaking but is becoming increasingly French-speaking, has been a key complaint of Flemish nationalists since the 1963 language laws—that guaranteed the Dutch monolingual status of Flanders, but not of Brussels—were passed (De Winter et al., 2004). Although this process began in the second half of the nineteenth century (Seoane & Mira, 2022), immigration from countries such as Spain, Italy, Morocco and Turkey from the 1950s onwards has meant that French has become the lingua franca. This may explain why, while 95% of the population have an excellent or good command of French, only 28% can say the same for Dutch (Janssens, 2008). This situation has led to Brussels being portrayed in Flemish nationalist narratives as a place filled with immigrants, where Flemish values and language have vanished (De Vidts, 2016). Nostalgia for this lost city, coupled with anxiety that the same thing might happen in other Flemish towns, forms a fundamental part of the Flemish Interest's rhetoric (Moufahim et al., 2014).

3.5. Conclusions

In February 2025, Bart De Wever, leader of the N-VA, became the first Flemish nationalist to assume the post of Belgian prime minister (Le Monde, 2025). This unprecedented event—the result of an election in which De Wever's party won 16.7% of the vote and the VB 13.7%—could be seen as a confirmation of a shift to the right of the Flemish electorate and an increase in political polarisation. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that part of the success of De Wever's campaign was based on presenting a more moderate image than the VB and

demonstrating his ability to reach political compromises with the French-speaking parties (Camatarri et al., 2025). Furthermore, the N-VA's website states that the party is "not anti-Islamic", that its integration model is "not assimilationist", and that "anyone can become a Flemish citizen without having to renounce their own identity" (N-VA, 2025). Therefore, despite its shift to the right, Flanders' understanding of religious diversity remains intact, at least in the narrative.

Despite the failure of the EMB mentioned above and the obvious influence of countries such as Turkey within Flemish Islamic communities, Flanders' case contains elements that could be useful for the Catalan government in its relations with the Muslim community. Beyond the potential narrative effect of Flemish identity as a means of resisting Walloon assimilationist policies, the emergence of parties such as Team Fouad Ahidar is particularly interesting and could help to anticipate future dynamics of Islam in Catalonia. It is also important to consider the socio-economic exclusion that continues to persist in a region where Muslims no longer belong to the first or second generation of immigrants.

Chapter 4: Catalan and Flemish Islam, a comparison

Following the structure of the previous chapters, this fourth chapter will compare the legal and institutional framework for managing religious minorities in both regions, existing Muslim institutions, social contexts, challenges to the integration of Muslims, and the politicisation of Islam. However, it is important to start by talking about numbers. In both regions, religious censuses are forbidden by law: under Article 16 of the Spanish Constitution (Bensaid, 2019) and under Articles 19 and 22 of the Belgian Constitution (Torfs & Vrielink, 2019), which protect religious freedom and the right to privacy, respectively. Nevertheless, it is estimated that there are around 690,000 people of Muslim origin in Catalonia (UCIDE, 2025), whereas in Flanders, according to Statbel data and calculations similar to those carried out by academics such as Moreras, the figure is thought to be approximately 370,000. Therefore, around 8.7% of the population in Catalonia are of Muslim origin, whether they actively participate in religious rituals or not. In the Flemish region —excluding Brussels— this figure is limited to 5.4%.

From this initial comparison, one can conclude that although Islam has been present in modern-day Catalonia for a much shorter time than in Flanders (Contreras, 2014), its growth has been much faster. For example, while Flanders has 162 Muslim oratories, 0.00002 per inhabitant (U.S. Department of State, 2023), Catalonia has 304, 0.00004 per inhabitant (Direcció General d'Afers Religiosos, 2023). However, a brief historical overview reveals that Belgium and Flanders have a longer history of managing Islam than Catalonia, where, between the expulsion of the *Moriscos* in 1609 (Sánchez-Blanco, 2011) and the passing of the Organic Law on Religious Freedom in 1980, Catholicism was the only recognised state religion (Llaquet Entrambasaguas, 2019).

4.1. Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Given that its religious freedom law dates back to 1830, Belgium has had more time to consider which model of religious management it wanted to adopt (Foblets & Overbeeke, 2002). It is in this context that the emergence of two models should be understood: the Walloon model, which is similar to French assimilationism, and the Flemish model, which is more influenced by German culturalism (Kaya, 2009). In Spain, where religious freedom is a relatively recent phenomenon, the assimilationist and ethnocentric model advocated by the Franco dictatorship disappeared at the end of the regime without a clear alternative emerging (Ramos, 2023). Academics such as Zapata-Barrero find it challenging to provide a precise definition of the Spanish integration model, as, since the arrival of democracy, Spain has struggled to develop a coherent policy in the area of diversity management (Zapata-Barrero, 2015). However, both Spain and Belgium have made parallel efforts to institutionalise Islam.

Although Belgium was the first country to legally recognise the Islamic religion, which it did in 1974 (Dalmia, 2020), Spain was ahead of it in creating an entity to act as the single interlocutor for Islam, something that was achieved in 1992 with the creation of the CIE (Llaquet Entrambasaguas, 2019). Although the Belgian EMB was not established until eight years later and was abolished in 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2023), the electoral process by which its representatives were elected in 1998 and 2005—in which around 70,000 people registered to vote (Zemni, 2011)—made it a more representative body than the CIE. Especially if one takes into account that the latter's Executive Board is not elected through a large-scale democratic process but composed of members from the various federations that constitute the organisation (Rossell, 2022). It is important to note that while the Catalan government has pursued a parallel strategy to institutionalise Islam through agreements such

as that established between the Generalitat and the CICC in 2002 (Moreras, 2008), the Flemish executive has pursued different policies.

Flanders has preferred to focus on the promotion of self-managed organisations by ethnocultural minorities. It has thus been responsible for promoting a cultural associationism that has a long tradition within the Flemish nationalist movement, part of whose political success was based on the strength of the cultural organisations that were created around the region before it gained administrative control with the federalisation of the Belgian state (Jeram & Adam, 2014). Catalonia, a region with a long tradition of associations dating back to the 19th century (Duch-Plana & Arnabat-Mata, 2024), could follow this example, particularly in light of the political disputes between the CICC, UCCIC and UCIDCAT regarding the representation of Islam in the region, which are discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

As explained above, Flemish culturalism can lead to a greater emphasis being placed on the country of origin of Muslims in the region than on their common religious status (Brubaker, 1992). This fact is illustrated by the influence of entities such as the Moroccan FMV and the Turkish UTV (Ettourki, 2017). However, Catalonia has the advantage of not having such a strong tradition in this regard. While scholars such as Astor have acknowledged the impact of the Anglo-Saxon model on Catalan religious policy management (Astor, 2014), the autonomous community, like the rest of Spain, appears to be establishing its own approach (Zapata-Barrero, 2015). Catalonia also benefits from having a well-defined autonomy statute, which establishes that its government has “exclusive power over religious entities that carry out their activities in Catalonia” (Girera, 2016, p. 19).

Not only can this be used to try to institutionalise Islam—an option that has proved unsuccessful, as evidenced by the cases outlined by Professor Kaya in his book on the

accommodation of Islam in Europe (Kaya, 2009)—but it can also be used to support religious entities that are not under the influence of other states. In this sense, the Flemish law that, as of 2021, requires regionally funded mosques to reject funding from countries such as Turkey or Morocco (U.S. Department of State, 2023) could provide a useful model to follow. However, this project would need the development of a funding programme for Islamic places of worship and their imams, akin to that outlined in Article 181 of the Belgian Constitution. In the case of Flemish mosques, this only began to be implemented in 2007 (Ettourki & Khoojinian, 2017). Implementing such a policy would represent a radical shift in the DGAR's policy, moving from "establishing and maintaining relations with institutional leaders in religious matters" (Gencat, 2019) to direct involvement in the country's Muslim institutions. This U-turn in the Generalitat's policy could also imply greater economic investment and the existence of an independent Muslim civil society, free from the political dynamics of its progenitors' countries of origin.

4.2. Muslim Institutions in Catalonia and Flanders

One could argue that the role played by the Turkish Diyanet and the Islamist movement Millî Görüş in Flanders, who control 92 mosques in Belgium (Yanasmayan, 2010), is mirrored in Catalonia by actors from the Moroccan state. UCCIC's relations with the Moroccan monarchy (De la Cal, 2018) and UCIDCAT's relations with the Justice and Development Party (Cembrero, 2024) are good examples of this. While Morocco does not directly control Catalan mosques, the majority of Muslims in Catalonia are of Moroccan origin (Moreras, 2008), and members of this community hold prominent positions in institutions such as the CICC, UCCIC and UCIDCAT. This facilitates the influence of the Alawi monarchy in the daily life of the region's Islamic community.

A recent example of this phenomenon can be seen in an incident that took place last April. In response to the exponential increase in the price of lamb due to a drought in Morocco, King Mohammed VI asked the country's Muslims to refrain from slaughtering a lamb during Eid al-Adha. Although this order was addressed exclusively to Morocco's Muslim population, who were asked to avoid comparisons between families who could afford to buy and slaughter a lamb and those who could not, the CICC and the UCIDCAT had to publish communiqués reminding Muslims in Catalonia that these orders did not affect them (Cembrero, 2025). Given the extent of Moroccan influence on current affairs, it is difficult to imagine that there are Muslim entities in Catalonia with an agenda that is not clearly aligned with Morocco's current politics.

The close relationship of Muslims in Catalonia with Morocco, as well as the fact that only 216,000 of them are eligible to vote in elections (Cembrero, 2023), could be two key factors in explaining the absence of Muslim parties in this autonomous community (Cembrero, 2023). Except for PRUNE, the first Spanish Islamic party to present electoral candidatures outside the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla—with a large Spanish Muslim population—(Peña Ramos et al., 2019) and which obtained 18 votes in the 2018 municipal elections in Mollet del Vallès (El País, 2023), Catalonia has no political party comparable to the Noor Party, the ISLAM Party or Team Fouad Ahidar. Similarly, the political representation of people of Muslim origin in the Catalan Parliament is low.

A brief glance at the list of Flemish Chamber MPs shows that, while not reaching Brussels levels, surnames of Arab or Turkish origin are more prevalent than in the Catalan Parliament. Of the 124 MPs elected in the 2024 Flemish regional elections, at least eight—Nadia Sminate, Hiba Faraji, Nawal Maghroud, Amina El Hichmani Vandenheuvel, Fourat Ben Chikha, Nadia Naji, Aimen Horch and M'Hamed Kasmi—come from families with a Muslim

background (Vlaams Parlement, 2024), which is far lower than the two representatives among the 135 members of the Catalan Parliament that share this background—Sabrin Araibi Marachi and Najat Driouech Ben Moussa (Baraza Curtichs et al., 2024). This difference is also present in the associative sphere, where Catalonia does not have a network of Muslim organisations as strong as the Flemish one.

However, although most Muslim associations in Catalonia are oratories, registered in this legal category for bureaucratic convenience (Moreras, 2008), there are examples of new entities similar to those in Flanders. One example is the Association of Muslim Women of Catalonia, which could be seen as similar to organisations such as the Action Committee of Muslim Women in Flanders (AMV). The AMV was formed in response to the controversy initiated by the Flemish minister Patrick Dewael in 2004 when he said that the forced wearing of the Islamic veil was “unacceptable” (Van Es & Van den Brandt, 2020, p. 199). The Catalan organisation, which has a significant number of female converts, also gained media attention following the first public debate on the Islamic veil (Sancho, 2008) and has participated in campaigns such as *Parla'm en català: sóc una dona catalana musulmana* (Speak to me in Catalan, I am a Muslim Catalan woman), created to prevent “people who have been living in Catalonia for years [...] from being treated as if they were immigrants” (Aneas Álvarez et al., 2020, p. 11).

4.3. Social context and challenges to integration in Catalonia and Flanders

Although some of the differences mentioned in the previous two sections regarding the position of the Muslim community in Flanders and Catalonia can be explained by the fact that Islam's presence in contemporary Catalonia is the result of migratory processes that occurred three decades later than those that brought it to Belgium (Contreras, 2014), the

statistical data provided by the study *Being Muslim in the EU* suggests that time alone is not the solution to the problem. According to the latest report, 42% of Muslims in Belgium claimed to have experienced discrimination in the 12 months prior to the survey. Alongside this rather symbolic figure, which is difficult to verify, there are other, more empirical numbers. For example, 40% of the general population has access to tertiary education, compared to only 17% of Muslims. Similarly, the percentage of citizens with temporary employment contracts is three times higher for people of Muslim origin (EUFRA, 2024).

However, it is fair to say that the situation is worse in Spain, where only 4% of Muslims have a higher education qualification. This figure is considerably lower than the 40% of graduates in the rest of the population. Temporary contracts account for 48% of Muslim workers, which is considerably worse than the less than 30% facing this situation in Belgium (EUFRA, 2024). Given this, one might assume that, while inequalities persist, they tend to reduce over time. However, as mentioned above, socio-economic conditions are not the only factor through which the level of integration of a cultural group can be observed. In Flanders, the level of integration has been measured, in many cases, by the level of proficiency in Dutch of the immigrants' children (Leman, 1999), something that draws parallelism with what CiU's civic nation-building project has tried to do with the use of Catalan (Hepburn, 2009).

In this respect, the data for Flanders is also more encouraging than that for Catalonia. Despite the common fear of internal minoritisation that affects stateless nations (Lipton, 2012), a 2018 study commissioned by the region's then vice president, Liesbeth Homans, revealed that 60% of Turkish-origin families and 67% of Moroccan-origin families speak Dutch at home (Galindo, 2018). In Catalonia as a whole, meanwhile, only 32.6% of the population have Catalan as their first language (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023). It is also true that the migratory waves that arrived in Flanders occurred after the language laws were approved in

1963 (Fadil et al., 2014). Conversely, the majority of immigrants from other parts of Spain who arrived in Catalonia did so in the absence of an autonomous Catalan government capable of promoting the public use of the language under a political regime—the Franco dictatorship—which sought to eliminate Catalan culture (Laitin, 1989). This fact places the two nations in very different linguistic contexts.

Based on this, it can be concluded that the discourse portraying Islam as a threat to Catalan identity lacks a factual basis. What does have empirical support is the fact that, even before the latest wave of migration, 60% of Catalans came from an immigrant background (Zapata-Barrero & Wenden, 2011). This is something that was not observed in the Flemish case, and it could facilitate empathy towards the migrant population. Nevertheless, the decreasing religiosity in Catalonia (Pérez-Agote, 2012) could harm the public image of Islam, which some view as an obstacle to the secularism that this autonomous community promotes (Zapata-Barrero & de Witte, 2006). Although the number of non-religiously aligned Flemish people has also increased in recent decades, approaching the figures of traditionally less religious countries such as the Netherlands (Jans, 2022), the Flemish culturalist conception (Jacobs, 2004) and a long tradition of pillarisation—a political, cultural and educational system divided between Catholics, socialists and liberals that lasted until the 1970s and still influences society (Dobbelaere & Voyé, 1990)—could mean that secularity in Flanders is less strict than in Catalonia.

However, this does not detract from the fact that initiatives such as the Flemish Parliament's prohibition of ritual slaughter and the municipalities of Antwerp, Sint-Niklaas and Ninove's prohibition of the wearing of the hijab in public administration have placed Islam at the center of the public debate in the last decade (Brems, 2020). This tendency ultimately aims to hold citizens of Muslim origin responsible for their exclusion by pointing to their culture and

origin, diverting attention away from the socio-economic problems that affect them (Balibar, 2004). This tendency is also observable in the Catalan political scene, where Islamophobic discourse has gained strength in recent years (Gracia & Bolaños Somoano, 2023). While the original cause of Islamophobia in Catalonia and Spain, also known as "morophobia", can be traced back to the time when Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon annexed the Muslim kingdom of Granada (Bourekba, 2022, p. 194), much of its recent success can be attributed to the discourses of political parties such as VOX at the state level and PxC and AC at the regional level.

4.4. The politicisation of Islam in Catalonia and Flanders

As previously discussed, Flanders was a pioneer region in the emergence of political Islamophobia. This movement gained strength prior to the 9/11 attacks and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh (Zemni, 2011). Eight years before the first racist incidents occurred in Terrassa (Moreras, 2008) and eleven years before PxC was created (Guedioura, 2012), the Flemish Block received 6.6% of the total Belgian vote (Zemni, 2011). In the first direct elections to the Flemish Parliament in 1995, this figure increased to 12.3% (Service Public Fédéral Intérieur, 2025). Not only are the Flemish Islamophobic parties older, but they have also enjoyed greater electoral success than the Catalan ones. While the VB became the most popular party in the Flemish House of Representatives in 2004, winning one in four Flemish votes (Erk, 2005), PxC never received enough votes to gain a seat in the Catalan Parliament, nor did AC until the 2024 elections (Gencat, 2024).

VOX is a separate case. Created in 2013, this Spanish nationalist, anti-immigration and anti-Catalanist party is led by Santiago Abascal, a former member of the centre-right Popular Party (Ferreira, 2019). Although the party has repeatedly spoken of the dangers of the

“Islamisation of Catalonia” (Gracia & Bolaños Somoano, 2023, p. 532) and has held 11 seats in the Catalan parliament since 2021 (Gencat, 2021), its case has not been considered in this comparative study. As it is a state-level political force with headquarters in Madrid, whose dynamics obey Spanish politics rather than Catalan ones, the study of its electoral trajectory and the motivations of its voters is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, disregarding VOX, it can be said that, unlike in Flanders, where the Flemish Interest holds 31 parliamentary seats and received 22.66% of the votes in the last elections (Service Public Fédéral Intérieur, 2025), Islamophobic discourse remains in the minority in Catalan politics, as AC just has 3.77% of the votes (Gencat, 2024).

Nevertheless, the visible similarities between the discourses of AC and the Flemish Interest, as well as the existing parallels between Catalan and Flemish nationalism, suggest that AC's voter numbers may boom in the future. This is one of the hypotheses put forward by political scientist Xavier Torrens in his book *Salvar Catalunya: La gestació del nacionalpopulisme català*, in which he compares the party to groups such as Alternative for Germany and the Flemish Interest—the successor of the VB—highlighting their success in applying Carl Schmitt's theories, which depict politics as a battlefield where there are only friends and enemies (Torrens, 2024). Another similarity can be seen in the defence of the need for independence from Spain and Belgium made by both Silvia Orriols, leader of AC, and Tom Van Grieken, the public face of the Flemish Interest (Anguera de Sojo, 2024; Cendrowicz, 2024). Both also speak of the “Islamisation” of their respective territories (Anguera de Sojo, 2024) and of the supposed dangers that immigration poses to the preservation of their “identity”, facilitating the comparison (Tóth, 2024).

Even so, it is fair to say that Catalan nationalism has always been at the ideological antipodes of the Flemish one. While Catalanism has always opposed fascism and totalitarianism — of

which it was a victim during Franco's dictatorship — Flemish nationalism has long sympathised with these movements, even celebrating Franco in its newspapers (Scheltiens Ortigosa, 2018). Nevertheless, since the failed 2017 independence referendum and the subsequent suspension of Catalan autonomy by the Spanish central government, the leaders of the N-VA have shown greater sympathy for Catalan nationalism. Indeed, when Carles Puigdemont, the former president of the Generalitat, fled to Belgium to escape the Spanish authorities, Bart De Wever welcomed him to the country, calling him a “friend” and offering his political support (Sijstermans & Brown Swan, p. 174).

This is not the only point of contact between Flemish politics and Together for Catalonia (JxCat), Puigdemont's party. Over the past year, JxCat, successor of CiU, has toughened its stance on migration to prevent voters from switching to AC. It is in this context that one should understand the agreement on the transfer of immigration competencies signed by the Generalitat and the central government in March (San José Serra, 2025), as well as Puigdemont's statement that "without immigration, there is no progress; but without integration and cohesion, there is no future" (Farrero, 2025). In this sense, JxCat's new approach appears to mirror the strategy adopted in Flanders by Paula D'Hondt, who advocated for a more assimilationist model (Zemni, 2011). This approach was also promoted by the CD&V through "citizenship education" (Loobuyck, 2020, p. 70) and by the N-VA through the adoption of some of the VB's migration policies (Biard, 2020). Although JxCat and the N-VA do not speak of cultural assimilation or blame Muslims for all the country's problems, their focus on migration still fails to provide solutions to the socio-economic and identity issues affecting citizens of Muslim origin in those countries, who are condemned to a lifetime of being labelled as "*allochtonen*" (Zemni, 2011, p. 31).

4.5. Conclusions

The clear parallels between the Catalan and Flemish cases with respect to the presence of Islam may lead the reader to believe that they are the same history, just three decades apart. But while Catalonia's rapid demographic growth, particularly due to immigration, has resulted in a higher percentage of citizens of Muslim origin in a shorter period of time, Flanders' longer experience dealing with religious diversity must be considered a strength. The existence of a well-organised Muslim civil society and the presence of more people of immigrant origin in parliament show that Catalonia still has a long way to go in this respect. Rather than being a risk, this is an opportunity. By building on the Belgian and Flemish experience, the Catalan government can avoid expending unnecessary effort on creating entities such as the EMB and instead focus on improving the socio-economic conditions of a community that continues to face less favourable situations than the rest of the population, despite the passage of generations.

Another lesson to be learnt is Flanders' progressive evolution towards a less culturalist and more assimilationist model. Contrary to Paula D'Hondt's predictions, this has not curbed the rise of the political successors of the VB. Although an increase in Islamophobic discourse is to be expected in Catalonia, mainstream parties should seek to avoid participating in it by putting too much focus on identity debates around Islam. Instead, it will be useful for them to pursue policies that do not criminalise the beliefs and traditions of a section of the population that could otherwise be attracted to political alternatives that increase polarisation around particularly sensitive identity issues. In this sense, the fact that the N-VA still does not proclaim itself to be Islamophobic or an advocate of an assimilationist model could serve as an example of the kind of red lines that should not be crossed, especially if the goal is that of accommodating Islam in Catalonia.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

After an introduction justifying the importance of this research on the basis of studying Islam as an internal European and Catalan matter, rather than as a foreign phenomenon or in relation to migration policy, the different academic essays on the situation of Muslims in this autonomous community were reviewed to identify a literary gap. It was found that the study of Islam in Catalonia, carried out by Jordi Moreras in 2008, needed updating, and that there were no comparative studies focused on the Catalan case since the moment in which Catalonia's Muslim population became more similar to that of countries such as France and Belgium than to other regions of Spain. On this basis, the following research question was proposed: **what are the main challenges and opportunities for accommodating Islam in Catalonia?**

To answer this question, the qualitative comparative case study methodology has been used, choosing the Belgian region of Flanders for such a comparison. This choice was based on demographic and cultural criteria. Both regions have similar populations—8,012,231 in Catalonia and 6,822,000 in Flanders—different identities to their respective states, a recent history in which the assertion of this difference played an important role in political discourse, and a similar percentage of citizens of Muslim origin—around 8% in Catalonia and 5% in Flanders. The stable presence of Muslims in Flanders predating that in Catalonia was taken into account to observe trends such as the integration of these citizens and the rise of Islamophobic discourse in view of what may happen in the Catalan near future.

Thus, the second chapter of this thesis aimed to highlight the specific features of the Catalan case by examining its relationship with Islam, which dates back to before the mythical foundation of the Catalan nation (Wimmer, 2017). Nevertheless, the expulsion of the *Moriscos* in the 17th century (Sánchez-Blanco, 2011), as well as the imposition of

Catholicism as the only acceptable religion, created a void in the management of religious diversity (Llaquet Entrambasaguas, 2019). Except for a brief period during the republican era (Solé & Albareda, 2012), this void would only be addressed again after the approval of the Organic Law on Religious Freedom in 1980 (Combalía & Roca, 2010). Despite this law opening the door to the recognition of Islam as a religion of 'notorious roots' and the establishment of the Islamic Commission of Spain, the Catalan government has continued to pursue a parallel religious policy, an area in which it has held exclusive competence since 2006 (Griera, 2016).

In this sense, it has been shown how the Generalitat, through the DGAR, has taken steps towards the institutionalisation of Islam in Catalonia by establishing cooperation agreements first with the CICC and then with the UCIDCAT and the UCCIC. Analysing these agreements served as a transition from the section 'Legal and Institutional Frameworks' to 'Muslim Institutions in Catalonia'. The latter section analysed the differences between the entities and their political links, paying particular attention to the close ties between the UCCIC leader, Noureddine Ziani, and the Moroccan monarchy (Cembrero, 2013); the UCIDCAT leadership and the Justice and Development Party (UCIDCAT, 2012); and the CICC leadership and the Tablighi Jamaat movement (Soage, 2018).

The section 'Social Context and Challenges to Integration' explored the reasons why Catalonia, the region with the largest Muslim population in Spain, does not have a large mosque. This question served to examine how the high degree of secularism in Catalonia could impede the accommodation of Islam (Zapata-Barrero & de Witte, 2006), as well as the fears of linguistic and cultural minoritisation present in a society in which Catalan has gone from being the sole language of the majority of the population (Rosselló et al., 2020) to being the primary language of only 32.6% of its inhabitants within a century (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023). This fear has gained weight in media discourse since the failure of the

independence process that led to the 2017 referendum and serves as a bridge to the final section of this chapter: 'The politicisation of Islam in Catalonia'.

The electoral trajectory of Platform for Catalonia (PxC) and Catalan Alliance (AC), the only two Catalan parties to have placed Islam at the centre of their political programmes, has been studied, underlining their differences, based on the fact that PxC defended the unity of Spain, while AC supports Catalan independence (Torrens, 2024). Due to this ideological disparity, and given that most violent incidents against Muslim places of worship have occurred in Spanish-speaking neighbourhoods with little affinity for Catalan nationalism (Astor, 2010), alternative explanations for the rise of Islamophobia have been suggested. For instance, the fact that unemployment among Moroccans living in Catalonia is higher than average (INE, 2025) and that their presence tends to concentrate in the poorer neighbourhoods, leading to a perceived "ghettoisation" of these areas (Astor, 2010, p. 19). This chapter concluded that the Catalan government should look to Flanders to identify how to accommodate Islam.

That is why the third chapter of this thesis analysed the Flemish case. It started with an approximate estimate of the number of citizens of Muslim origin living in the region, which is thought to be between 280,000 and 370,000. Having established this framework, it proceeded to analyse the influence of the German culturalist tradition in Flemish politics, which has traditionally been opposed to the French and Walloon civilisational model (Brubaker, 1992). It then explored the current legislative framework, paying particular attention to articles 21 and 181 of the Belgian Constitution, and also examined the challenges posed by the formation of the Executive of Belgian Muslims (EMB), an organisation that divided its candidates based on their country of origin (Zemni, 2011) and was dissolved in 2023 amid allegations of a lack of transparency and foreign influence (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The section dedicated to ‘Muslim Institutions in Flanders’ examined the Diyanet's role in financing Flemish mosques and how it has exploited the regional and federal governments' failure to comply with Article 181 of the Constitution, something that remained unresolved until the Flemish government started paying the ministers of religion's salaries in 2007 (Ettourki & Khoojinian, 2017). The importance and diversity of organisations promoted by Muslim-origin civil society, which are funded in many cases by the Flemish Ministry of Culture's Action Plan for Interculturalism, have also been emphasised (Saeys et al., 2014). The role of communities of origin, whether Moroccan or Turkish, in these organisations has been highlighted, revealing that few cases exist in which these divisions have been overcome.

Where the divisions between Moroccans and Turks have been surpassed is in the Muslim political parties, as exemplified by the case of Team Fouad Ahidar with a presence in the Flemish parliament since 2024 (IBZ, 2024). The fact that this party combines identity issues such as opposition to the ban on the veil in public administration with economic demands typical of social democratic parties (De Marneffe, 2024) opened the door to the analysis of the issues discussed in the section ‘Social context and challenges to integration’, where it is explained that, despite low unemployment rates in Flanders, school failure and poverty remain higher among Belgian Muslims, something that is often used for certain political parties to link these problems with Islam (Zemni, 2011).

Meanwhile, discussions about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the ritual slaughter or the use of the Islamic veil are gaining more and more weight in the Flemish public debate (Brems, 2020), fostering Islamophobic political tendencies that hold the descendants of immigrants responsible for their exclusion and poverty (Balibar, 2004). This same strategy, used by the Flemish Block and its successor, the Flemish Interest (Erk, 2005), has gained popularity since the 1990s, influencing the discourse of the other parties in parliament, such

as the other major nationalist party in Flanders: the N-VA (Biard, 2020). This paradigm shift is explored in the section ‘The politicisation of Islam in Flanders’, where fears of linguistic minoritisation and of the Brussels Frenchification process (De Winter et al., 2004) expanding beyond the Belgian capital are of great importance (Moufahim et al., 2014). The conclusion of the chapter points out that, despite all this, the N-VA, the party now leading the Belgian government, continues to define itself as “not anti-Islamic” and “not assimilationist” (N-VA, 2025).

The fourth chapter compared the Catalan and Flemish cases, trying to answer the initial question about the challenges and opportunities of accommodating Islam in Catalonia. On this basis it exposed that, in the legal and institutional section, the main challenge is the absence of a clear and coherent model in the area of diversity management (Zapata-Barrero, 2015) and that the opportunities would have to do with the fact that, although the Generalitat has signed collaboration agreements with entities such as the CICC, none of them has the dimensions of the EMB, something that could be useful to focus future efforts on a policy of promotion of cultural associations similar to the one promoted by Flanders. In this, Catalonia could benefit from its long associative tradition (Duch-Plana & Arnabat-Mata, 2024).

The fact of having competences in religious matters (Griera, 2016) is also an opportunity that the Catalan government could take advantage of in order to avoid foreign influence in the mosques, something that would imply, on the other hand, committing to pay the salaries of the imams. This opportunity contrasts with the challenge posed by the big influence of the Moroccan monarchy in the life of the Muslims of Catalonia, as shown by the communiqués issued by the CICC and UCIDCAT recalling that the rules on Eid al-Adha dictated by Mohamed IV do not affect Muslims who do not live in Morocco (Cembrero, 2025). In the case of the ‘Muslim Institutions’, Catalonia also has the opportunity to collaborate with

entities such as the Association of Muslim Women of Catalonia, although the biggest challenge is the fact that Catalonia does not yet have a civil society of Muslim origin as wide and diverse as the Flemish one.

Halfway between the institutions section and the one about the 'Social context' can be placed the challenge posed by the low presence of citizens of Muslim origin in the Catalan parliament. Even so, the non-existence of a party such as Team Fouad Ahidar is an opportunity to prevent the identity debate around Islam from gaining strength and becoming an element of political polarisation. Apart from that, the poor data on socioeconomic integration provided by the study *Being Muslim in the EU* (EUFRA, 2024) is a major challenge that must be faced, as is the negative data on the use of Catalan, which facilitates the emergence of the reactive discourse of formations such as Catalan Alliance (Torrens, 2024).

It can be seen as an opportunity that, with its 3.77% of votes (Gencat, 2024), AC is still far from the results that the VB obtained at its best (Erk, 2005). But the similarity of their Islamophobic discourses (Anguera de Sojo, 2024; Cendrowicz, 2024) makes it easy to suspect that the results of AC may improve in the coming years. That is why, given that, while the last lines of this thesis were being written, AC presented in the Catalan Parliament a legislative proposal to ban the use of the Islamic veil (Baquero, 2025), placing this issue at the centre of the Catalan media agenda, the following policy recommendations should be taken into account with the aim to ensure that the accommodation of Islam in Catalonia can benefit from the opportunities it still has:

1. Define a clear model of integration. Although Catalonia has clear competencies in this area, it has not yet been able to create its own integration model. In this sense, the Flemish culturalist model could provide inspiration for Catalonia. Nevertheless, it is important to bear

in mind its shortcomings, especially the significant role it gives to the countries of origin of Muslims. This opens the door to interference from countries such as Morocco and Turkey, while hindering the development of an independent Islam. Recognising this, Catalonia should develop a model that considers its own context and its long history of resisting assimilation into Spanish hegemonic culture. In doing so, the Generalitat could position itself as not only a guarantor of individual rights, but also an active promoter of an inclusive Catalan identity compatible with religious diversity.

2. Avoid symbolic controversies. As it has been shown throughout this study, the debates on the veil use or ritual slaughter are not only useless in improving the living conditions of Muslims in Catalonia and Flanders, but also encourage their stigmatisation. That is why, in view of the Catalan Alliance's intention to put this debate at the centre of the political agenda, the Catalan government would do well to avoid giving it too much publicity. This attitude can help both to curb political polarisation and to avoid the emergence of parties such as Team Fouhad Ahidar. It may also allow the rulers of this region to promote programmes of economic inclusion or to start talking about the necessity of funding mosques aligned with the region's interests.

3. Implement public funding for mosques. As long as mosque finances and imam salaries depend on foreign actors, the autonomy of local Muslim communities will be compromised as well as the possibilities of developing a Catalan Islam. A regional funding model inspired by the Flemish implementation of Article 181 of the Belgian Constitution could gradually replace external financial dependence of the Muslim places of worship from external powers. This would mean a U-turn in the DGAR's current responsibilities and would guarantee the economic sustainability of Muslim institutions while aligning with the Generalitat’s stated aim of promoting religious pluralism within a secular, locally governed framework. However,

this shift must be accompanied by strict financial transparency conditions and a prohibition on parallel funding from foreign governments.

4. Give priority to the emergence of a Muslim civil society: Instead of focusing on creating something similar to the EMB, as has already been attempted with the agreements signed with the CICC, UCCIC and UCIDCAT, the Catalan government should give priority to the emergence of a Muslim civil society. This would not only favour a direct contact with the various communities, independent of the interests of the various Moroccan political factions, but would also foster the emergence of a clearly Catalan Muslim community. Initiatives such as the financing of civic entities proposed by Flanders can be a good example to follow, without falling, however, into policies that promote the segregation of Muslims taking into account the country of origin of their parents or grandparents, whether Morocco, Pakistan or Senegal. This policy should be focused both on the promotion of transnational religious entities and on the support of secular entities such as Kif Kif and Ella, with the ultimate goal of involving all Muslims of Catalonia.

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