December 6th, 1978, millions of Spaniards said ‘yes’ to the referendum by which democracy and a new constitution was endorsed. In doing so, 40 years of dictatorial rule ended, and a new model of society was designed. Franco defined Spain as a traditional catholic country that represented ‘the spiritual reserve of the West’ (del Olmo 2000: 31–32), the Spanish Constitution of 1978 changed that definition into one in which general plurality was the norm around the country, and religious plurality was recognized as a national feature of it. In this chapter, I will focus on my fieldwork with young Muslims in Madrid. But firstly I will describe the Spanish religious law modifications from the latter years of Franco’s dictatorship to this day. Secondly, I will stress the socio-demographic processes that have happened in the meantime. Finally, once the legal and social contexts have been explained specified, I will analyze two socio-political and identity processes observed among members of young Muslim associations founded in Madrid over the last decade. By means of this example we will be able to consider how this particular group of young Muslims feels to belong to Spain and look to normalize the ‘Muslim image’ within the Spanish imaginary.

From National-Catholicism to Religious Pluralism (1939–2010)

At the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a dictatorship was established all over the country. Franco’s government reduced, even tried to make disappear, any internal differences. But, at the end of this political regime, in 1967, a relevant legal shift happened. The Law of Religious Freedom was enacted in order to recognize and allow the religious practice of many Arab Students who, taking advantage of good diplomatic relations between Spain and Arab countries, arrived in Spain to study Medicine, Law and other disciplines in different Spanish universities. Thanks to this same law, Muslim people from Ceuta and Melilla (two Spanish cities located in the North of Africa) saw the legal recognition of
their beliefs and practices (Jiménez-Aybar 2004: 30–31; Elena Arigita 2006: 565–566).

In spite of this law, Islam, as an admissible religion for Spaniards, was not allowed until the political period known as the ‘Transition’ to democracy, when the personal choice of the conversion to Islam was considered (del Olmo 2004: 128–129). Afterwards, the Spanish Constitution, ratified in 6th December 1978, defined Spain as a plural, religious country. From this moment, other legal innovations were carried out regarding religious pluralism.

In 1980, the Law of Religious Freedom was reformulated in order to make its articles compatible with the new legal framework. In doing so, three religious minority groups obtained new religious rights, such as Spanish citizenships. These were Muslims, Jewish, and Protestants. Each one of these groups saw how, slowly but surely, their claims for equality were taken into consideration by the State, now in charge of equating their rights and responsibilities with those of the Catholic Church (Jiménez-Aybar 2004: 21).

In the case of Islam, Spanish converts and Muslim Arab students—who arrived in Spain in the 60s and 70s—were identified by the Spanish government as representatives in charge of negotiating new civil and religious rights for Muslims. On 14th July 1989, the Spanish Government awarded Islam the category of “notorio arraigo” (from now on, ‘deeply rooted’) religion, i.e. the recognition that the Muslim religion has a sufficient number of believers, and its faith is spread far enough around the country to prove its establishment among Spanish society. Three years afterwards, by means of the Spanish State Religious Cooperation Agreement with the Spanish Islamic Council (CIE)—signed on 10th November 1992—this statement was confirmed with the assumption that Islam holds a centuries-old tradition in Spain and a prominent importance for the construction of ‘Spanish identity’. This agreement and the recognition of ‘deeply rooted’ religions were also granted for Protestants and Jewish people (López et al. 2007: 26). Interestingly, all of this took place on the 500th anniversary of the ‘Reconquista’, a time in which the Catholic Kings of Spain threatened to expel any non-Catholic who resisted conversion to Catholicism. Such recognition aimed to repair the historic obliteration made toward the three

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