

Islam and Christianity in 21st Century Europe

An Islamic Perspective

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In determining the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Europe one should take into consideration several factors including theology, culture, history and politics. I believe that there is a possibility to perceive the reality of the situation other than the way it is presented by most popular media and those who are interested in maintaining a narrative of a conflict. This does not mean at all that we ignore any component of what constitutes the *other*. There is a need for a paradigm shift.

The scenario that we are dealing with here is that of how to perceive Islamic presence on the European continent? One thing is definite: Islam and Muslims in Europe are not modern phenomena! While there are millions of Muslim immigrants, there are also European Muslim peoples and communities in the Balkan and Eastern Europe, dating back for many centuries. In addition, there are Europeans who reverted to Islam. This means that there are Muslims who are Europeans through and through!

On the civilizational level, Muslims contributed to the welfare of Europe during the heydays of the Islamic civilization in Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), not as an external entity, but as being indigenous to the European scene. The European academic Islamic centers in Cordova and other cities provided the foundations for the

Renaissance. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was a European in as much as he was a Muslim. Muslims today continue to contribute to their European countries. Europe needs to go beyond the formal and academic discourse on multiculturalism and proceed to have an open house that recognizes and accommodates everyone. A genuine adoption of pluralism would comfort the Muslim minorities who are also worried about their status. To deny Islam a proper place in the public sphere would be a loss of a viable civilizational force.

It is important to realize the cumulative nature of knowledge and reducing it to a category of being Islamic or Western is metaphoric. This reduction prevents us from seeing the various civilizational players on world stage. Not seeing the role of the *other* in building one's country is counterproductive, to say the least!

Religion and culture, regardless of their names, are subjected to the onslaught of aggressive globalization that promotes a monolithic material pseudo-religion. Human cultures might become endangered species as a result of the ever advancing material ethos and icons.

There are two things that Muslims carry with them; Islam and culture. By Islam I mean the universal message, which is contained within the Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet). It would be an asset for coexistence if Islam is perceived as a continuum of monotheism as espoused by earlier revealed messages, including Judaism and Christianity. Islam augments and revives the original message that suffered from human editing. There is recognition of the history of revelation. It is no wonder that Jews and Christians are considered "People of the Book". In fact,

many of the names of the prophets and messengers that were sent to the Jews and the Christians are celebrated in the Qur'an. The end result of this approach, from an Islamic perspective, is a softening of the otherness of the Jews and the Christians. They are definitely not totally other. There is so much in common that if scholars of the three faiths deconstruct the myths that were created and accumulated along the years, their respective positions should be identical!

This should lead us to the role of culture as something distinct from revelation. The second thing that Muslims carry with them is the cultural package, which at times contradicts the universal message. This cultural package is not monolithic and reflects a rainbow of cultures at least as many as the Muslim communities themselves. The ethnic background also differs and that is why some of the social divides amongst the Muslims themselves are erected. It is for these reasons that we find neighborhoods in some of the larger European cities, as in the UK, ethnic clustering. This is understandable from a sociological point of view. The rationale behind this phenomenon is a search for support and a place where one might feel at home. For the immigrant Muslim, this could prevent a dramatic cultural shock, yet it might prevent the same person from being at home outside his or her safe haven! Of course, two things could be observable from a distance; ethnicity and the cultural package. While some of it might be celebrated (chicken-curry becoming very popular in England), other parts might be grounds for discrimination (hijab for women). The problem stems from being *other*. It is the *otherness* of the Muslim which forms the backbone of discrimination.

The media is invited to play a positive role in easing the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in their countries by avoiding stereotyping. It is almost

exclusive to the Muslim that his/her religion is highlighted whenever something goes wrong. The media should think on its own of an ethical code, where treatment is awarded to members of all faiths and backgrounds on equal footing.

The media either fell victim or participated willfully in creating an enemy out of Islam. The end of the Cold War witnessed a search for an enemy of the "West". The neo-imperialist search engine came up with the "clash of civilization" and the "end of history". To Huntington's dismay, there is no clash of civilizations the way he wants it. And to Fukuyama, it is not the end of history yet! No particular ethnic group of intellectuals, including those in think-tanks influencing foreign policies, is awarded the position of being world trustees of axiology. No, they are not trustees of norms and values and the best way of living. That would be social Darwinism.

The Islamic worldview continues to challenge other worldviews, in as much as they do to Islam. That being said, it does not automatically translate into a conflict. It is very strange how the ideas or actions of a fringe of people, on both sides, are highlighted to maintain the validity of the narrative of conflict. This in turn would justify the enormous budgets allocated for the military industry and war machines. Obviously, a peaceful coexistence would send many military generals to early retirement.

I found it utterly unacceptable that a certain choice of words is used as representative of the Islamic political discourse, when they are really non-existent in the Islamic worldview. Take for example the concept of "Holy War". While I can translate it into Arabic as *Harb Muqaddasah*, it does not show up in the Qur'an or the

Sunnah, not even once. What is more interesting is that this concept was never used by any Muslim scholar in the history of Islam, which covers fourteen centuries of prolific scholarship. Any scholar of Islam knows that Jihad is not the equivalent of "Holy War" (See Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*). He or she would know that war is not holy at all in the Islamic worldview. Why then this is the prevailing choice?

Another important concept that has implications for Muslim-Christian relations is that of Dar Al-Harb (The Abode of War). I acknowledge this time that these words do exist in Islamic literature. Nevertheless, it should be known that this concept is a construct. It does not exist in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. It does exist in late works in Jurisprudence. In addition, it is not the only concept that is used to describe the category of the lands of non-Muslims. Other constructs include Dar Al-Sulh (The Abode of Reconciliation), Dar Al-'Ahd (The Abode of Covenant), Dar Al-Da`wah (The Abode of Preaching) and Dar Al-Shahadah (The Abode of Witnessing). The latter was coined in Europe, I believe by Professor Tariq Ramadan, if I am not mistaken. If I have to pitch in, I would say that it is Dar Al-Hiwar (The Abode of Dialogue). The argument remains the same. Why is it the case that *Dar Al-Harb* only is highlighted? Obviously, any country becomes a land of war only if it is engaged in acts of war.

Feeding a language that reinforces stereotyping along with the repetition of some of the images with which the western audiences are continuously bombarded would lead ultimately to Islamophobia. There is a need to protect the Muslim minorities in the European context from the repercussions of this phenomenon. The peaceful majority bares the brunt of policies or trends that result from the systematic

stereotyping, especially when a dramatic event takes place. Within the same context one should not forget the many Jews and Christians who continue to criticize targeting the Muslim community, and they come to their aid in times of crises. It is the loss of the civil liberties that is at stake in times of crisis or constructed conflicts.

While the first generation of immigrants continue to entertain the idea of going back to where they came from, the second generation usually goes beyond this internal conflict. In both cases, we talk about law abiding citizens who are loyal to their European countries. A small margin continues to struggle. Being loyal to one's country does not mean that one should always agree with domestic or foreign policies. The Muslim community should not be tested every time there is a crisis with a certain part of the Muslim world. It is their right to differ with their governments and to voice their concerns.

I suggest that there should be a dialogue between the local authorities and the Muslims to prevent the ghettoization of the Muslim community. There are political implications for this and both sides ultimately benefit from this dialogue. No one should be exempted or dismissed. I have seen "moderates" being promoted, while the rest of the community is marginalized. This is counterproductive. There are ample ways to engage the Muslims in the affairs of the larger community while being accommodated.

Somewhere on this wavelength, the position of the Church is crucial to our discussion. While some churches rush to the help of Muslims (One of the churches in Sweden raised funds to buy a cemetery for Muslims in 2002), at least some members of other churches chose to play tug-of-war! The October 1999 synod of Europe was

stage for those cardinals and archbishops who differed with their colleagues who sent reconciliatory messages and wanted to welcome Islam on the European scene. Some speakers, such as Bernardini and Besancon, have warned of an Islamic conquest of Europe (National Catholic Reporter, *Europe's Muslims worry bishops*, by John Allen, Oct. 22, 1999)

Islam or Muslims in their relationship with Europe is not a zero sum game. The Muslim immigrants chose Europe as their destination to make a living. If it weren't for the drastic gap in per capita income between their home countries and Europe, they would not have shown up there in the first place. One should not forget that this problem, at least in essence, is the result of the colonial era. The problem is exacerbated by fiscal policies imposed on the third world countries by institutions that are supposed to help. The gap between the south and the north would continue to grow, unless the notion of justice, rather than national interest, is reintroduced to politics.

The dynamics that govern the life of Muslims in the European context, and in other similar northern contexts, reflect an ethos that is both European and Islamic. They cherish being European while at the same time they respect their Islamic and cultural values. When the Irish community celebrates St. Patrick's Day in the United States, no one thinks of Shamrocks that fill the public sphere as something at odd with being American. Often Muslims raise flags as green as the Shamrocks. The same tolerance would be welcomed.