

(Islam and Muslims in Europe (2

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As is the case in Europe today, one can clearly affirm that the legal system protects and guarantees the manifestation of Muslims' identity. The challenges that Muslims are finding themselves in today are more related to a minimalist interpretation, unyielding to the aforementioned legislation. A curtailed vision of the secular model and concern about the prejudice concerning Islam finds its way in this discussion about the "question of Islam" in Europe, which is a problem that originates from a certain mentality and susceptibility as much as a supposed legal incompatibility.

Community Versus Ghettoization

The practice of Islam, by its very nature, exemplifies the community. Whether it be in the prayer or the fasting, the payment of the social tax (zakat) or the Hajj – it is this community dimension which, through brotherhood and solidarity, that transcends to the very essence of a Muslim's being. Beyond Muslim's immediate family, the community is the first setting for Muslims' social enlightenment.

There are numerous Islamic teachings that guide the heart and spirit towards attaining its own individual fullness drawn from the community – a place of faith and spirituality. In other words, if one refers to Islam, one must then automatically allude to a community of beings, of faith, spirituality, and brotherhood. This is a fundamental component of the everyday religious practice.

Any constitution should respect the freedom of religion, it should leave the responsibility of defining personal philosophies to members of every religious community. It is one thing to say it, but another to affirm that Muslims should cut themselves off from any feeling or aspiration of community in order to occupy a place for themselves in the secular arena.

This being said, one should not confuse a community based on faith with an ambitious community whose sole purpose is to be isolated and to stand out within the social, political, and legislative framework. This whole notion of intellectual and physical segregation is alien to the very spirit of Islam. Practicing one's faith within a community is one thing, while isolating oneself from the surrounding society is another.

In terms of the legal and political aspects, Muslims must be viewed as individuals who exercise their conscious with regards to their rights and obligations as citizens. This would then imply knowledge of laws and participation in the social, political, and economic climate. To put it

simply, Muslims should have a genuine feeling of belonging within the European society. The mind-set prevalent among some second and third generation Muslims makes no sense, it's as if they live in a bubble. They ignore the societal context of their surroundings and haven't even mastered the language of their home country, for example, as occurs in several English countries. The community is the source of enlightenment of the spirit and should provide serenity and an intellectual vigor that permits for the blossoming of the Muslim individual as a European citizen.¹

Culture

Just like the concept of identity and community, the reference to an "Islamic culture" brings to mind an image of isolation and rejection of European culture. Certain people would see the proof of this by saying that Muslims are not genuine in their desire to integrate, and that they are merely taking advantage of their citizenships, whereas at the same time, looking to maintain their cultural particularities, such as their dress code, management of space when it comes to men and women, music, and other issues.

In some people's eyes, true integration would mean what affects every aspect of one's character. This is actually a very narrow vision of integration, almost resembling the notion of assimilation. In theory, Europeans theoretically assert that Muslims have the right to freely practice their religion, but at the same time, they deny them their rights when this expression becomes too visible.

In actuality, the future of Muslim presence in Europe will come to a truly "Islam-Europe Culture" disengaged from the Arabic culture of North Africa, Turkey, and Indo-Pakistan, although it is suitable to refer to them for inspiration. This new Islam-Europe culture is currently in the process of being developed and shaped.

As is the case in Europe, by thinking about diverse issues such as the dress code and artistic and creative expression, a whole new culture is being mobilized with a European energy while taking into account the national customs and simultaneously respecting the Islamic values and guidelines. Far from being an isolated undertaking, it is more a true acceptance of the realities of living in Europe together with the promise of cultural enrichment. The mixing of ideas and initiatives among the young Muslims is sign of an interesting phase about to be set in motion.²

Which Muslim Presence?

One cannot say enough about the importance of taking into account the aspect of time when evaluating the integration process of Muslims in Europe. Behind the veil of tension and violence in certain suburbs in European countries, a profound, new, unique energy is sweeping among the young generations of the Muslim communities. In less than 10 years, a new

conscience has arisen around the issues of the social, political, and economic ventures that are trying to find grounds from which to develop. In this respect, the 1990s was a period of transition and development, a challenge without a doubt. But yet, how rich and promising it all was.

More and more second-generation Muslims are acquiring confidence and a political maturity founded not only from the awareness of their own identity, but also from a thoughtful analysis on the legal, social, political, and economic parameters. They achieved what their parents had not been able to and developed an attitude less and less frivolous and more and more participatory on the local and regional level.

Protecting One's Faith

Active young Muslims in certain associations had, for the longest time, been receiving the message that for Europeans to tolerate their presence, they would have to give up their religious practice. This rhetoric, which mainly came from political personas and the media appeared to confirm such a conclusion. So, as a reaction to this rhetoric, young Muslims decided that it was better to be isolated.

It is only very recently, that through analysis, debates, and external and internal discussions that it became apparent that nothing in the letter or the spirit of the European legislation was in opposition with a peaceful and complete practice of the Muslim religion.³ The laws do not say what some would like to have them say.

Essentially, what religious Muslims wanted was to protect their faith and to be assured about their right to practice their religion. The awareness of this possibility personally and legally, that is to be fully Muslim and European created in a vast majority of Muslim associations, a coherent and open dialogue of identity. This stimulated a break from the past where the discussions had often been reactionary and aggressive ten years back. This achievement is of utmost importance even though these associations are always faced with bothersome administrative aspects due to suspicion, fear, and the widespread confusion that if someone is practicing, that means he is "already" a fundamentalist.

Integration of the Citizen

An increasing amount of Muslim associations are committed to transmitting a civic awareness to their members. Some citizen training programs are in the process of being internally structured or in collaboration with certain institutions that specialize in this area. Until now, these initiatives remain abstract and theoretical.

However, whoever makes the effort to discover the initiatives and come into contact with the work of the Muslim associations will notice the consciousness, maturity and energy that drives

a great number of them. They have gone beyond obstacles without compromising their religion to achieve a true citizenship which commits them to becoming truly aware of their obligations and rights in the European setting. Their relationships are strengthening with other social and political players on the local level and dialogue is being organized. Such initiatives are new and quickly expanding, especially in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, and Germany.

Independence

More and more associations are acting in a very independent manner and are born of indigenous European dynamics. This phenomena which often goes unnoticed is of great importance. Associations are being created and they aim to respond to the needs of the Muslim community at the grassroots level. This process is occurring everywhere in Europe and is a sign that Muslims of the old continent are in the process of finding their voices and mainly, their political and financial independence.

It is true that currently this new movement appears to be scattered and chaotic, but it is going through a necessary transition so that Muslims can become free, independent, self-organized, and in control of their own destiny and representation. A large number of projects are seeing the light of day, responding to an urgency and mobilizing the Muslim community at the regional level in financing the new constructions underway and totally independent from a foreign power.

The most prominent example is that of mosques. These are certainly not just places of worships, but are function as respectable spaces that fit the needs of the population. Access to this financial and political independence is crucial and pressing for it is through this that Muslims will be able to fully and freely attend to the challenges which are waiting for them in Europe.

European Muslim Representation

Often, in many European countries, a lot of thought has gone into the notion of Muslim representation. The first order of action was to determine who would be the facilitator, it had to be someone who had knowledge of the region. The initiations in this sense were numerous and one cannot say that the new experiments were elaborated in the same light. The future of the Muslim community of Europe through their financial and political independence requires that they be respected for having chosen to be Muslims, their fundamental choice.

This process will bring into being a representative core which could be long and require some meditation, and which follow the shift in mentalities. This will culminate into a real awareness among the young Muslims of their required individual commitment and their responsibility in the success of this undertaking. Inevitably, the above mentioned points are bound to stimulate

some interesting dynamics. To decide upon a unique institutional representation is neither serious nor realistic and reveals once again that it is not an exercise of political transparency. In the hour of transition and the building of awareness, more and more Muslims becoming stable in all aspects of life. The only road for them to reasonably follow is one which has plural expressions, where Muslims can think about a large council which succeeds in reuniting the diverse ways of thinking to respond to the urgency of certain decisions. One should hope in the meantime that these initiatives would bring the fabric of the associations, at the local and regional level to move towards a project which is more refined and which is independently represented. We are very far still from this reality. Here the community needs time whereas the government appears to be in a hurry. Unless the latter doubts the indigenous, independent energy, and truly democratic climate within the Muslim community, wisdom and lucidity will oblige the government to take into the account the realities of this context.

Conclusion

We must take into account the element of time and understand the unavoidable tensions that result from the beginning stages of coexistence (with the added factor of the "other's visibility"). We are getting closer to the realities of the moment to detect the profound dynamics which are widespread among the diverse Muslim communities. They are now clear enough that we understand the present situation better, as it should be perceived. The open and positive confirmation of the Muslim identity, as we have discovered, is a concrete reality as is the integration of the citizen.

Far from being a ghetto mentality, the majority of Muslims opt for a serene and open presence and some will go as far as proposing a "Islam-Europe culture." We see the subsequent rumblings of an "intimate integration" into the European society, which should be objective and the finality of any pluralist society, which respects the concepts of identity and differences. One should remain cautious and aware. The obstacles are great and the explicit or subtle rejection and discrimination are everyday realities of many Muslims, who at times doubt the intentions and actions behind the political actors and co-citizens. At the moment, the current status quo states that in order to be European, one must be less Muslim. One should remember the meetings, debates, and communal projects that have brought to light the issues at the local level, this has been a very important step which contributes to going beyond mere suspicions against Muslims about whether they are really integrated into their European societies. Some Muslims have found hope when they were given the opportunity to meet with the concerned politicians, activists, intellectuals, et cetera who were respectful, constructive, and ready to commit to an honest and adherent dialogue. These exchanges demonstrated that

true change is currently underway.

For many Muslims, this new phenomenon will also give them the opportunity to see themselves in another light. Often seen as a enigma, some have unfortunately internalized the idea of assimilation by making oneself "very small," disappearing in the woodwork as an "invisible presence." The surrounding pressure has made them hide their religion as one hides a inferiority complex. Such an attitude will not bring promise of social peace and harmony but instead, possibility of an explosive situation.

The present dynamics are such that they should transform the above mentioned feelings. In time, Muslims will understand that their presence gives richness to the European society. As the debates unfolds and an awareness is created, this presence will allow this society to access a religious diversity and a new unique culture.

This feeling will culminates when more Muslims participate in debates that concern the central foundation of their society such as questions on values, education, and ethics. This is what is required of them, as citizens they are obliged to ask questions and to participate with their social, political, and economic partners. Their integration will be seen as a very positive contribution to the larger society while at the same time it will maintain their spiritual integrity. Unfortunately, many European countries still view Islam as something that is not only foreign but also dangerous, it is also a looming source of instability. They prefer to quietly deal with the regimes of the Muslim world , many of which do not observe the law, although they give Europe security and protect their interests. With a few exceptions, hardly any European country has attempted to talk directly to its Muslim citizens and residents other than through these foreign regimes. Virtually all European states want autonomy for their Muslim citizens, and yet they pursue a policy based on affiliations and allegiances with the governments of their origins.

In the years ahead, the states of Europe are going to have to rethink how they cope with their Muslim citizens and Islam. Muslim activist associations are spreading all over Europe, and they are producing full-fledged European Muslim citizens who are politically and financially independent and are already beginning to ask questions about the justification for the Europeans' link with the dictatorships of the Muslim world. Already, they are claiming the right to organize themselves on their own and decide for themselves the legitimacy of their religious representation. This is a fast-growing phenomenon.

Whatever Muslim countries may want, they are losing ground, and second- and third-generation Muslims have fewer ties than ever with the countries their parents came from. If Europe is to succeed in the tricky venture of achieving cultural and religious pluralism in its societies, then there is an urgent need to move away from security-based thinking, in order to

encourage dialogue, negotiation, and confidence between nations and their citizens and the only democratic way is one that respects both the law and its citizens.

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Notes

The opposition brewing between first and foremost being a Muslim or European is, .1 according to this perspective, a false debate as the two are from the same source nor of the same priority. To be a Muslim, is to carry a concept, a meaning of life and death; to be French, English or German is to play one's role as a citizen of a nation. There is no more contradiction of being Muslim and French or English and Humanist and French or English. For example, the formulation "French humanist" shocks no one when it refers to a philosophic framework, nor "French humanist" when it comes to a reference of a political commitment. We are to use the same vantage point when referring to Muslims.

2. Next to some simple musical imitations which are sufficient enough to "Islamicize" the text, there exists some very interesting and original experiments in the subject areas of: song, theatre, organization of celebrations, and creating of clothing. The fundamental idea being to harmonize the respected Islamic recommendations and the process of expression where the importance is kept of connecting with societal roots and customs.

3. The question of integration does not apply to those men and women who have decided not .to practice their faith