(Islam and Muslims in Europe: Fundamental Issues (1

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In the middle ages in Europe, Islam contributed tremendously in molding the western, secular, and modern rational thought. The new Muslim presence in the old continent dates back sixty to seventy years, thus revealing a historically very short time period. It was only through centuries of discussion and conflicts of the other religious and ethnic minorities (Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox as well as Poles, Italians, and Portuguese migrants), that it was possible to feel at home and acquire some rights in the host country. How could the issues be resolved for Muslims in a span of only two or three generations?

In the 1980s, the new visibility of Muslims stimulated misconceptions, suspicion, and at times, mutual rejection. One could say that these reciprocal tensions were a relatively normal and logical response. It was difficult to bypass this atmosphere without a pronounced dialogue and close working relationship materializing. Something which until now had been impossible, judging from the characteristics of this first generation immigrant population that had an unstable economic standing and unpredictable status that was often perceived as temporary. The first waves of Muslim immigrants were predominantly laborers from North Africa, Turkey, and Indo-Pakistan. They were mainly people of modest means and pressured by the economic climate. Their educational standing and fragile status did not permit for more than a generation to ponder the realities of living in Europe. It only would be the second and third generations who would transform the mind-set of these laborers. The former demonstrated that their presence in Europe was a reality, whereas in countries like Great Britain, ethnic and religious groups often replicated the social structure of their home country or region.

Furthermore, the economic context has brought about deep social hardships, such as unemployment, rejection, alienation, violence, et cetera. These factors contributed to making the process of integration increasingly difficult and complex.

It is important to note that several international events of the time had a deep impact in shaping perceptions. From the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the scandal of Salman Rushdie, to the madness of the Taliban, the attacks and violence in the Near East and the daily horror in Algeria, it is hard to say to what degree these events shaped the mentality and negative perception of Islam, a widespread phenomena in European society. We do know that these scandals fed the tensions stemming from the social crisis that Europe was undergoing with its high level of unemployment, exclusive policy, and violence.

Often defined as a problem of immigration because of its urgency, these factors were enough to make it very difficult or almost next to impossible to debate the issue of the Muslim presence in Europe. One can assume that a sort of Islamaphobia had been entrenched in the minds of many according to the title of a fine study commissioned in Great Britain by Runnymede Trust in 1997.(1) This diabolized image of Muslims hindered a thoughtful evaluation of the dynamics that were sweeping across the European communities. Mentioning these points right from the start allows us to avoid dangerous curtailments which bypass a strict analysis, not taking into account the past and judging without the appropriate context. If this is how we were to measure things, then most definitely we would come to the conclusion that Islam is incompatible vis à vis European legislation. or by the same token, that it is impossible for Muslims to integrate into European society. Finally, we would be given a somewhat irreversible, conflicting, and marginalized character of the Muslim identity. A true analysis would take into account the realities of history and everyday life, with its energy, fluctuation, and development.

Pressure of the Second and Third Generations

For two reasons, which may on the surface appear contradictory, it was the second and third generation Muslims who played an assertive role in evolving the mind-set among the diverse Muslim communities in Europe. On the one hand, the level of young Muslims practicing Islam was somewhat weak because for many, integration within the society meant a total assimilation.(2)

Compelled by this phenomena, the first generation leaders of the mosques and associations rethought their framework and how it was being implemented. Born of exile and committed to Muslim governments and militants, they learnt to adapt to the context facing these young people as well as the language which they spoke. They were to redefine their religious teachings and reorient the execution of social and cultural activities.

On the other hand, the resurgence of a young, practicing Muslim minority created a multitude of associations. Within fifteen years, their number had doubled and even tripled in some countries. Empowered, these young, European-born Muslims, usually around the age of thirty and often time students educated in European universities, became involved in an increasing amount of activities. Their commitment compelled a deep shift in mentality because they considered themselves to be at home in Europe and that they had the right to make the most of their predicament. This is where the rift occurred between generations — contrary to the first generation immigrants, these young people strived to openly occupy the intellectual and social sphere.

Their energy and European culture stimulated their elders, previous members of Islamic movements in North Africa, Near East , and Asia, to completely reassess their previous way of functioning and their intellectual positioning in accordance to the country they were living in. This phenomena provoked important debates within the Muslim communities and, in particular, among Muslim scholars. Consulted on matters such as Islamic law and jurisprudence, they were compelled to reevaluate their own postulate in order to form new legal opinions that had to be adapted to the Western way of life.

These associations were being formed during the 1980s and 1990s when there was a necessity for a resurgence of Islamic thought in the West. As Europeans, these young Muslims asked direct and indirect questions which required explicit answers. They asked is Europe should be considered (according to the terminology and geopolitical factors of the Muslim scholars of the 9th century) as a dar al-harb (enemy or non-Muslim lands), versus dar al-Islam (a place where Muslims are the majority and live according to the law, Muslim lands). In other words, was it possible to live in Europe?

If the answer was yes, what should be the relationship of Muslims with regards to the national legislation? Can a young Muslim acquire a European nationality and fulfill his role as a citizen? So many questions in which the Muslim scholars had never as of yet been able to respond in a manner, which was concrete and detailed.

With the 1990s, there were an increasing number of encounters dealing with theological and legal issues. The Muslim scholars in the Muslim world, as well as imams and intellectuals living in Europe, took part in these important dialogues.(3) With regards to Islamic jurisprudence, this undertaking brought up some very important points. Both sides, scholars as well as the European Muslim communities arrived at a consensus.(4) The following are highlights of some important principles:

References and Principles

During the first few years of the Muslim presence in Europe, the feeling most widely shared by the immigrants and Muslim scholars was that they were in the midst of a transition period. The feeling was that one day or another, they would return to their country of origin. Strengthened by a few legal opinions communicated as quickly as possible (regarding halal meat, mosques, financial transactions, et cetera), no real or organized thought had been made because at the time, it just did not seem necessary. Satisfied with the answers widely used to deal with common issues, no further thought was given.

It is only with the appearance of the young Muslim generation when it became necessary to reanalyze the main Islamic sources (Qur'an and Sunnah) when it came to interpreting legal

issues (fiqh) in the European context. This interpretation (known as ijtihad) would make it possible for the younger generations to practice their faith in a coherent manner because many of them intended to remain in Europe and a large number had already received their European citizenship.

It is important to note that this was a very recent phenomena which obliged the scholars and Muslim intellectuals to take a closer look at the European laws, and simultaneously, to contemplate the changes that were taking place within the diverse Muslim communities. To list all the multiple facets of this transformation is impossible to do in this article, but, what we can mention is the five main points that were established concerning the Qur'an and Sunnah, which were recognized by the majority of Muslims living in Europe as follows:

1.A Muslim who is a resident or citizen of a non-Muslim country should understand that they are under a moral and social contract with the country in which they reside. In other words, they should respect the laws of the country.

2. The letter and spirit of the secular model permits Muslims to practice their faith without having to completely assimilate, there is no need to disconnect themselves from their Muslim identity.

3.Used by the jurists during a specific geopolitical context (9th century), the historic terms (dar al-harb, non-Muslim lands and dar al-Islam, Muslims lands) are invalid and do not take into account the realities of modern life. New concepts were decided upon to exemplify the presence of Muslims in Europe in a positive way.(5)

4.Muslims should consider themselves to be full citizens and participate with conscience in the organizational, economic, and political affairs of the country in which they reside without compromising their own values.

5.With regards to the possibilities the European legislation offered, nothing stops Muslims, just like any other citizen, from making choices which respond to the requirements of his own conscience and faith. With respects to any obligations which could be in contradiction with Islamic principles (a situation which is quite rare), this would represent a case which must be studied in order to identify the priorities and the possibility of adaptation (this should be developed at the national level).

These five points do not take into account the thought, adaptation, and most of all, steps that were taken to evolve intellectual Muslim thought. The latter becomes particularly important when a great number of unanswerable old situations , had found today a point of reference. The five points formulate the most essential principles. They made it possible to provide proper interpretations, especially in matters marginally understood and badly interpreted. The

following are three examples of such cases:

Basic Concepts

The idea of Muslim identity was widely discussed because it appeared as if it was a barrier to integration. It was necessary to clarify the requirements and perspectives as well as to confirm that the Muslim presence in Europe is not an obstacle. Muslim identity is an expression of an intangible existence through all it's essential elements . Here we can mention four points that explain Muslim identity as follows:

1.Faith, a spirituality and a practice (cultural dimension)

2.An understanding and intelligence, using the Islamic sources as much as the European social, political, and cultural contexts (concept of rationality and responsibility).

3. Education and dissemination, faith is considered as a trust in which one must convey through education.

4.Action and participation in the social dynamics directed towards justice and a better way of life

All Muslims should be able to ensure that the above mentioned points are protected, no matter what country they live in. In other words, Muslims have the "right to identity" and a concrete implementation of his freedom of conscience.(6)

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Foot Notes:

1.Commissioned by the Muslims of Britain and overseen by professor Gordon Conway. Islamophobia: Fact not Fiction. Runnymede Trust. October 1997.

2.60 to 70 percent say they fast during Ramadan, but only 12 percent to 18 percent pray everyday; 75 percent to 80 percent do not speak their mother tongue at all or speak it very badly. See To be A European Muslim. Islamic Foundation: Leicester, November 1999.

3.About a dozen Muslim scholars from the Muslim World met with each other in July 1992 and then in July 1994 at the European Institute of Social Sciences at Chateau-Chinon to give an Islamic legal perspective on the Muslim presence in Europe. In Great Britain, the Islamic Foundation multiplied its efforts in this respect starting from 1990. But London has also seen the creation, in March 1997 of The European Council, to elaborate on judicial opinions and research. See the periodical Arabic language Sawt Uroba (The Voice of Europe), The Federation of Islamic Associations of Europe: Milan, May 1997.

4.The regrouping of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al-Muwahhidun and Al-Muhajirun, aggressively call for a minimizing implementation of the Shari`ah in Europe, very isolated, even if the big media accord them immeasurable importance.

5.In our book, To be a European Muslim, we call to attention the discussion surrounding these concepts and we propose, in the light of Islamic sources, the concept of dar ash-shahada, a place where one testifies to the importance of attesting to faith before God (the Shahadah), which makes Muslims who they are (intimate dimension), and the witnessing before man which is an exemplification of his participatory presence in the society in which he lives (collective and social dimension).

6. One should note that every individual has the right to make his or her choice, among the principles mentioned above.