

UC Berkeley

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In October 1998, The Middle East and West Europe Centers of the University of California at Berkeley jointly sponsored a two-day symposium, 'Islam and the Changing Identity of Europe: Culture, Politics and Citizenship in an Era of Globalization'. The programme focused on the deep ideational changes which have been taking place in Europe due to the Muslim populations which have sprung up in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and elsewhere. The symposium explored political and cultural aspects of the emerging identities of these relatively new citizens – how they view themselves and how they are viewed by non-Muslim Europeans, as well as how the relatively indigenous populations of Europe are being forced to rethink their own collective identities, both as Europeans and as citizens of specific countries.

In their symposium prospectus and introductory remarks the organizers argued that these are no longer migration issues in the traditional sense, because most Muslims in Europe are no longer migrants. Muslim populations have been present in Europe for several generations, although many Europeans have been slow to recognize that Islam is now a European religion.

Report on a Symposium 'Islam and the Changing Identity of Europe'

The conference featured six scholars and a number of discussants:

Tariq Modood (*University of Bristol, UK*) pointed out that minorities in the UK are protected as members of ethnic/racial groups rather than as Muslims. As in the US, there has been a shift in emphasis from the right to assimilate, to the right to maintain one's 'differences' and to have them positively valued. Modood contrasted the UK, where a multicultural approach seems to be making headway, with France, which remains essentially assimilationist and anti-multicultural.

Michel Wieviorka (*École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris*) addressed processes of cultural transformation that occur as Muslim youth in Europe inevitably alter the Islamic traditions that shape their responses to non-Islamic environments, calling what results the 'Islam of the Youth'. He placed this in a larger context of French national deconstruction and the decline of republicanism and of mechanisms of national integration.

Krishan Kumar (*formerly UK, now University of Virginia*) spoke on 'Europe, the Nation-State and the Question of Identity in an Era of Multiculturalism', comparing different settings in Europe. Kumar spoke about the dilemma of maintaining one's cultural origin in the UK, and of a future of hyphenization, hybridity, syncretization and creolization, but he also eloquently defended assimilation for those who choose that path.

Bassam Tibi (*University of Göttingen, Germany*) focused on themes of cultural and political integration of Muslim groups. The notion of 'cultural co-existence', based on principles of diversity and plurality, was central to his address. Tibi suggested that a 'Euro-Islam', or European form of Islam, is emerging, but he cautioned against turning a blind eye to the more fundamentalist elements which also exist within the spectrum of European Muslim opinion.

Hala Mustafa (*Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Al Ahrum Foundation, Cairo*) addressed political concerns on a more global level, also emphasizing co-existence. Mustafa called for the transformation of existing unequal power relations between Europe and the Islamic states in the developing world, and noted that current processes of globalization would significantly affect this imbalance.

Paul Lubeck (*UC Santa Cruz*) discussed the economic and sociological issues facing Europe, particularly those issues pertaining to Islamic networks and the challenges they present to citizenship claims. Lubeck noted that the contributions of future Muslim migrants to Europe's economy, and hence to its global competitiveness, will not reside primarily in menial labour. Rather, migration trends from Muslim majority countries contribute to the area of technological skills.

Several issues emerged from the presentations and debates:

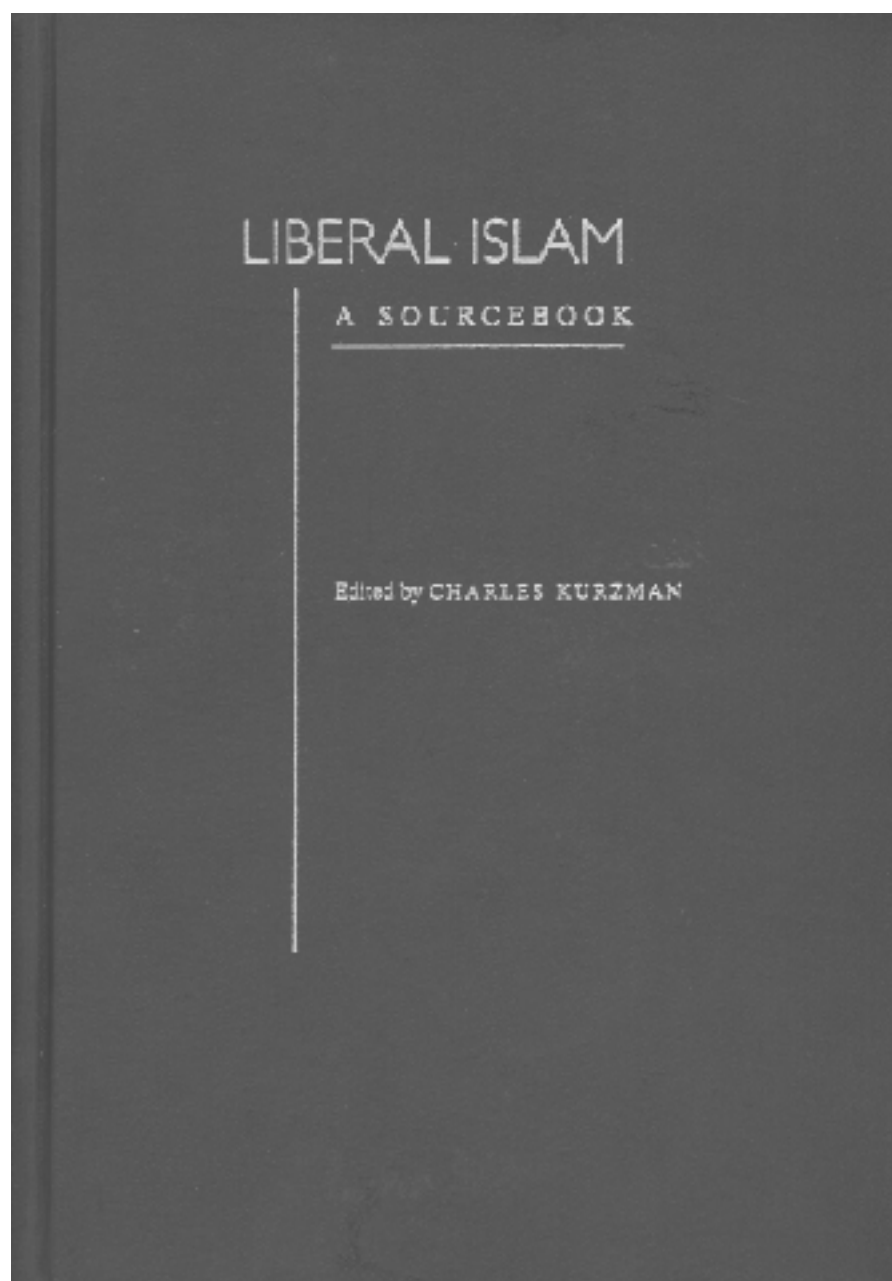
Regarding the nation-state, some argued that, with the rise of European institutions, the nation-state is being replaced by wider political entities in terms of both sovereignty and identity. Others argued that such notions are premature, noting also the persistence of sub-national identities, both ethnic and regional.

A second issue is assessing the relative power of assimilationism versus multiculturalism in different national settings. Assimilationists argue that Muslims in Europe will and should gradually become more like other Europeans. Multi-culturalists, on the other hand, argue both the inevitability and the desirability of retaining non-European heritages and promoting cultural diversity.

Finally, how powerful a force is Islam in determining identity? Some suggest that other factors – such as ethnic, national, regional, tribal, class or economic identities – can often be stronger than religion. The identities of Europe's Muslim populations are not fixed but vary in both the short term and historically.

Several speakers cautioned against reifying and attributing causality to Islam, noting that there are important differences amongst Muslims in Europe – especially between Islamic activists and secularists. While many Muslims resist Euro-American post-industrial culture on moral grounds, they often thrive in the infrastructure of globalization, which is the product of capitalism. In any case, there was general agreement that both Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe are articulating new citizenships and new ethnicities through a continuing dialectic.

Participants in the conference are revising their papers for a collective volume which is projected for publication in 1999. ◆



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