

Belgium
HERMAN DE LEY

In the core countries of the European Union, Muslims, today, are counted in the millions and Islam is engaged in a process of institutionalization in the midst of secularized societies. Whereas Christianity is receding to the countryside, Western Islam is manifesting itself as an urban phenomenon: Muslim populations are concentrated in towns and the symbolic attributes of Islamic faith and culture are becoming more and more conspicuous in this urban environment. In these closing years of the twentieth century, Europe is more than ever before becoming a space where Islamic, Christian, Jewish and secular traditions come together 'to fight, support, and fertilize each other'.¹

If we would accept Huntington's well-known thesis of the coming 'clash of civilizations',² this state of affairs would imply that the 'front' between Islam and the West once again (i.e. since 1492) is no longer 'safely' located between the continents, or between the eastern and western parts of the European continent, but that it is actually running through our very towns and societies. Are we heading then for a kind of 'civil war' in Western society itself? And the Muslims in our societies: i.e. the Turks, the Moroccans and the others, naturalized or not, immigrants and converts, are they to be imagined as 'the enemies from within'? Will they, as a consequence, eventually have to be driven out again – just like the Moriscos in Spain were, at the beginning of the 17th century?³

There is no denying that there are signs that would superficially seem to confirm such a reading: for instance, the riots and confrontations between 'Muslim' youngsters and the police which on a more or less regular basis break out in our towns.

Already, a new racism is legitimizing this growing polarization between the so-called indigenous population and the so-called immigrants, not only in Belgium but in other European countries as well. This new racism, which is actually accompanying the construction of European unity, can be identified as an 'anti-Muslimism'. While it is being constructed along the selfsame lines as the anti-Semitism in the thirties,⁴ this European racism is mainly based on the ethnicization of cultural, i.e. religious, differences between 'Europeans' and 'Muslims'. Starting from the myth of an originally 'white' and '(lay-) Christian' Europe, it operates by identifying 'Turk/Moroccan' and 'Muslim' and, generally, by identifying 'immigrant' and 'Muslim'. As Fred Halliday formulated it, this anti-Muslimism 'involves not so much hostility to Islam as a religion (...) but hostility to Muslims, to communities of peoples whose sole or main religion is Islam and whose Islamic character, real or invented, forms one of the objects of prejudice'.⁵ Feeding on these anti-Muslim feelings and fuelling them at the same time, right-wing extremist parties are exploiting the situation, in Belgium as well as in other countries of the E.U., in order to win popular votes.⁶

However, there is no fatality in this evolution. All in all, the process of Muslim integration into our secularized society has been going on peacefully for many decades. It is urgent though that an end be put to all discrimination and also that Muslims, especially youngsters, get the chance to contribute as Muslim citizens to the social development of their country.

The number of Muslims in Belgium – i.e. of people having an immigrant Muslim background and/or considering themselves Muslim (converts included) – is rapidly growing. Of course, figures are necessarily inaccurate, for (a) the criterion of nationality is becoming less and less relevant since a growing number of people originating from Muslim countries acquire Belgian nationality; (b) the definition of Muslim identity has inevitably many nuances, going from strictly-practising believers to laymen and agnostics. In the early nineties, the total number

Muslims in Belgium Enemies from within or Fellow-Citizens?

of people in Belgium with a Muslim cultural background was estimated at 285,000 – more than 2.5 per cent of the total population. At this moment, the number is going beyond 350,000. Concurrent with this demographic growth, there has been a proliferation of mosques and prayer halls: on the eve of the new century, Belgium counts some 240 places of Islamic worship.

Whatever the precise figures may be, it is undeniable that 'Belgian Islam' has become a cultural and social fact. Quantitatively, it represents the second largest religious denomination of the country; or to put it otherwise, Islam is the largest minority religion in Belgium, far outnumbering Protestantism, Judaism, Humanism, etc.

The settlement of a large Muslim population in Belgium is an irreversible phenomenon. The major question therefore that has to be faced by a society that considers itself to be democratic and pluralist, is the one concerning the place and space that one is willing to concede to these cultural and ethnic minorities. Will we actually allow them to maintain – be it inevitably in interaction with their secular environment – their collective cultural and religious identity? Or will we, out of irrational fear for the future survival of the secular state (if not of 'the West' itself), impose upon Muslims a kind of privatization or secularization of Islam – something that, for the great majority of them at least, would be tantamount to demanding that they abandon their religion?

There is no denying that, from the perspective of basic human rights, the Belgian state made a good start when as early as 1974 it passed a law granting Islamic worship the same status as that accorded to religions historically established in the country: Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. The immediate and most spectacular effect of this recognition was the introduction (since 1975-76) of the teaching of Islam in public schools, on the same basis as the other religions. At present, there are about 700 Muslim teachers giving Islamic instruction in both primary and secondary schools, their salaries being paid by the State.

The law of 1974 also allowed for financial provisions to be made for the costs of the infrastructure (e.g. places of worship) and the 'personnel' of the religious group (e.g. the salaries and pensions of the Imams). The importance of this kind of religious 'engagement' by the Belgian state – which is officially a secular state, based on the principle of separation between Church and State – is measured when one considers that in this way the Catholic Church is annually receiving a total provision of no less than about 10 billion Belgian Francs. This sum is paid by the Belgian taxpayer – which is also by non-Catholics, meaning Muslims as well. As for Islamic worship, this kind of advantageous treatment has still not been put into effect. So, for a quarter of a century or more, Muslims financially contribute to a system they themselves are excluded from. The reason for this unfortunate state of affairs is officially the same one as that for the existing deficiencies in the status of the Islamic teachers: viz. that it requires the identification of a national Muslim authority, an issue that until now has remained unsolved.

This financial discrimination was accompanied, all these years, by violations against the basic rights of religious freedom, which in prin-

ciple are guaranteed by the Belgian Constitution (e.g. the right to be buried according to your philosophical or religious faith). Generally, Muslims in Belgium as yet do not have the possibility of burying their loved ones in the cemetery of their own place of residence. The same goes for religious rights at school, in prison, and in hospital: for example, the right to eat food that is prepared according to your religious prescriptions; the right to safeguard yourself against (threats of) violations of your physical integrity – e.g. by wearing a head-scarf and modest dress; and the right to celebrate your religious feasts, etc. These infringements must be taken together with: the usually negative coverage of Islam in the press and the other media; regular conflicts in schools (e.g. concerning the head-scarf); the systematic stigmatizing of Islamic values and symbols as being obstacles for a smooth integration of Muslim immigrants; and, of course, the many forms of 'daily racism' being perpetrated by officials, for example by members of the police force, etc.

It goes without saying that this situation puts heavy pressure on the peaceful coexistence between the communities, and as a consequence on the democratic future of Belgian society as well. Luckily, there are political signs pointing in a more hopeful direction, i.e. of a society willing to really assume its cultural and ethnic pluralism. The Belgian government, for one, has recently accepted a proposal for the election of a representative council of the Belgian Muslim communities. Once put into place, this council offers the perspective that the institutional situation of Belgian Islam one day will be finally regularized. Still more recently, a new law has been accepted on burial places, which could provide for Muslim sections in local cemeteries.

Of course, equality of treatment at the institutional level, if ever realized, does not suffice. Islam and Muslim culture should as well be enabled to develop their intellectual and social potential within a secularized society. Besides taking the necessary social measures, an efficient anti-racist policy requires the introduction of a whole set of measures in the cultural and educational domain as well. For example, in our secondary schools Arabic and Turkish should be introduced as optional languages for all pupils; the history and culture of the Mediterranean countries of origin and the history of immigrations in Belgium and Europe should receive a place in our schools' curricula; a comparative history of religions should be offered, etc. At the university level, an all-round curriculum of modern Islamic studies should be introduced: for the sake of Muslims but also for that of society at large, the study of Islam should be freed from the historicist and colonial shackles of traditional Orientalism.

The final goal should be the 'interculturalization' of our society. Muslims themselves, it should be said, whatever their ethnic affiliations, are playing more of an active role in this process of cultural and social interaction. Running their own social and cultural organizations and working together with non-Muslims as well,⁷ they are demonstrating the correctness of the view that, far from being a threat, the West once again has much to gain from the new Muslim presence. ♦

Prof. dr Herman De Ley is the director of the Centre for Islam In Europe, University of Gent.

Notes

- Gerholm, T., & Y.G. Lithman (eds), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London 1988), in their Introduction, p. 3.
- See S.P. Huntington (1993), *The Clash of Civilisations?* For an interesting critique of Huntington by an Arabic philosopher, see Mohamed Abed El Jabri, 'Choc des civilisations ou conflit d'intérêts?', in: M. Dureúas (ed.), *Xoc de civilitzacions*. Barcelona, 1997, pp. 324-31.
- For this 'expulsion model', as a typical European 'logic of racism', see A. Rea, 'Le racisme européen ou la fabrication du "sous-blanc"', in: Rea (ed.), *Immigration et Racisme en Europe*. Brussels, 1998, p. 182.
- See Marc Swyngedouw, 'La construction du "périmètre immigré" en Flandre 1930-1980', in: Rea (ed.) 1998, pp. 107-30.
- Fred Halliday (1996), *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation. Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. London, p. 161.
- The strength of racist feelings in many countries of the E.U. was openly revealed by the opinion poll that was organized by the European Commission, at the closing of the 'European Year against Racism', see 'Racism and Xenophobia', *Euro-barometer Opinion Poll*, NR. 47.1, presented in Luxembourg, 18-19 December 1997. For an analysis of the figures, see the contribution of Andrea Rea, *Le racisme européen ou la fabrication du "sous-blanc"* (1998).
- E.g. in the 'Forum voor Gelijkberechtiging en Interactie' ('Forum for Equal Rights and Interaction'), and in the newly created 'Centre for Islam in Europe' (University of Gent).
- So Brian Beedham, 'Not again, for heaven's sake. A Survey of Islam', *The Economist Surveys*, August 6th 1994, pp. 16-18.