

The West

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# Towards the Carving of Islamic Space in 'the West'

Since the early 1970s, Western Europeans and North Americans have demonstrated increasing concern over the latest chapter in the Western encounter with Muslims. This concern is focused on the current trend of human migration from South to North and from East to West, with the potential of altering the ethnic and religious composition of Western nation-states and, what some fear, their democratic and capitalist traditions, as well as liberal social values. To those in the West who believe in the purity of race, civilization, or culture, or in a supersessionist 'Judeo-Christian' worldview this movement of people is a menacing threat to their cherished ideals of a homogeneous Western society. For many, it increasingly represents a significant demographic shift that posits a major cultural challenge whose precise consequences are unpredictable and unforeseen since they require a variety of adjustments by the host countries and by the new immigrants.

The Muslim encounter with 'the West' is an on-going drama that has intertwined the histories of the two peoples for over fourteen centuries. While the actors have changed, past experiences ranging from peaceful coexistence and cooperation to mutual vilification and armed conflicts influenced the collective and invented memories of both Muslims and Westerners and tend to colour their relationship. Two distinct features mark the current encounter between Muslims and the West. The first is the assumption of world leadership by the United States with the consequent creation and empowerment of the state of Israel and the promotion of the idea of a superior 'Judeo-Christian' worldview by some sectors of Western society. The second is the growing Muslim emigration, settlement and acquisition of citizenship in the West: in Western Europe, and established countries of European migration such as Australia, Canada, Latin America, South Africa, and the United States.

It is estimated that there are about eighteen million Muslims living in the West. The majority in Western Europe were recruited as temporary guest-workers with the full expectation that they would eventually return to their homelands. The emigration to the Americas during the last quarter of the twentieth century came initially from the educated classes seeking higher education, better economic opportunities, and political and religious freedom. Since then, asylum seekers and refugees have significantly augmented the diversity of Muslims in the West. In the process, Muslim communities have been transformed from collectivities of migrant, predominantly male labourers to immigrant families, from sojourners to settlers, and from transients to citizens. Attempts by various Western nations to halt Muslim migration have led to the creation of Muslim minority communities which increasingly appear to have become a permanent fixture in the West.

Each Western nation has a particular relationship with its immigrant population that has been conditioned by its colonial legacy, its historical memory, and its traditional perception of its former subject people as well as its heritage and perception of its role in the world. Each is in the process of developing policies and models for the treatment of its newest citizens who are challenging its perception of its liberal traditions and religious tolerance. These range from containing Muslims as permanently foreign, encouraging their integration, promoting their assimilation, or forging them into distinct manageable ethnic minorities. Canada, which identifies itself as a multi-cultural society, encourages and subsidizes the maintenance of distinctive cultures. The United States has experimented with a variety of models beginning with 'Anglo conformity', to melting pot (until discovering that there were too many unmeltable), to equal religious conglomerates: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Currently, two controversial paradigms compete for

adoption. The first, promoted by Christian fundamentalists, the Jewish community, and a large number of politicians, identifies America as grounded in Judeo-Christian values. Its critics note that such a definition threatens the separation of religion and state, maintaining the current power structures, confining Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and peoples of other faiths and values to the periphery. The second model advocates a pluralistic society, which celebrates difference, raising fears of the division of America into ethnic identities, or 'grievance groups'.

At the same time, Muslims have been grappling with the problem of living in the context of an un-Islamic environment. The initial concern came out of the experience of 'minority-ness' in the Indian context. The late Abu al-'ala al-Mawdudi travelled to Europe, the United States, and Canada admonishing Muslims to eschew integration into their new environment or leave the West lest they lose their soul in its wayward ways. Other scholars have insisted that such an opinion is misguided since the proper interpretation of Islamic law allows Muslims to live outside the abode of Islam, as long as they have the freedom to practise and propagate their faith. Still others are of the opinion that Muslim presence in the West provides them with an unprecedented opportunity to fulfil their Islamic duty to propagate the faith. In the process, they not only obey God's commandment to call people to Islam, they also help to redeem Western society from its evil ways and restore it to the worship of God.

Advice on how to survive in the West comes from a variety of quarters. H.H. Bilgrami (director of the World Federation of Islamic Missions, Karachi, Pakistan) prescribed a programme of Islamic education that inculcates an ideological identity:

- To maintain the means whereby Muslims in the West remain conscious of their identity;
- To ensure a dynamic element which can face the onslaught of the Western cultural influence on the minds of Muslim children;
- To ensure that Muslim minorities remain conscious of their position as an ideological group with values different from those of non-Muslims;
- To function as a source of information about Islam to non-Muslims;
- To serve as a means for the propagation of Islam, which is the sacred duty of every Muslim;
- To ultimately raise a strong ideologically-integrated community for the consolidation of the *ummah* to the basis of unity.

The conscious effort to define Muslims as distinct became the concern of Zain el-Abidin, the founder of the Institute for Muslim Minority Affairs in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He, too, worried about Muslim loss of identity in the West. To protect the community from disintegration, he prescribed developing Islam as an ethnicity, erecting ramparts not only to keep the non-Muslims out, but more importantly, to hold the Muslims in. Thus he identified important ideological constructs and behavioural distinctions as indispensable markers of the cultural divide between Muslims and Westerners. For him, the West becomes a laboratory where a now modern identity is to be fused, one that fosters particular behavioural patterns, promotes a com-

mon language, distinctive customs and traditions, recognizable styles of dress and food, among other cultural distinctions. These are easier to identify and particularize, than the effort to inculcate ideas because they are more tangible. At the same time, he was aware that ethnicity could be very divisive given the diversity of migrant groups. The difficulty would be in determining whose language, customs, or behaviour is more Islamically legitimate.

Furthermore, he noted that ethnicity itself is un-Islamic. Thus while cultural distinction promotes cohesion, and functions as a barrier to being absorbed or assimilated into a multi-cultural society, it may also veer from the truth of Islam which affirms that 'physical traits, cultural traditions, dress, food, customs, and habits are subordinate or subsidiary to their main doctrinal identity, that God created differences in people in order to facilitate recognition, that the true identity is determined by the manner in which a person or group of any race, colour or physical type approaches the business of living, uses his faculties, selects ends and means for his worldly endeavours.'

Some Muslims have become active in the mosque movement in the West and are defining the mosque as the centre around which Muslim life should revolve. For a growing number strict adherence to ritual practice in the adopted country marks the boundaries of faith. Announcing the need for a clean space for daily prayer, the act of praying, donning Islamic garb, refraining from eating pork and improperly slaughtered meat, as well as fasting during the month of Ramadan have become self-delineated boundaries that help immigrants feel secure, distinct, and outside the bounds of pollution. For some, conforming to Islamic prohibitions has become a conscious act of witness of a distinctive faith despite public ridicule and a demonstration of steadfastness and perseverance in the face of social obstacles to their performance. Muslim immigrants and their children are aware of the necessity of dealing with prevalent pre-formed stereotypes, honed over centuries of conflict and competition. They also have to deal with the increasing rhetoric of demonization and prejudice propagated in the United States by right wing public intellectuals (Pat Buchanan and George Will), Christian fundamentalists (Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson), and Zionists (Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Steve Emerson, and Charles Krauthamer). In Europe, they have to cope with the rise of xenophobic statements of right wing European political parties such as the Front Nationale in France, Vlaams Blok in Belgium, Republikaner in Germany, and the Centruumpartij of the Netherlands.

The public discussion about the Islamic threat accompanied by violence against Muslim life in Europe and North America as well as acts of terrorism perpetrated by Muslims have heightened tensions. Islam is accused of being a religion that is devoid of integrity and progressive values, one that promotes violent passions in its adherents, a menace to civil society, and a threat to the peace loving people of the world. Muslims are cast as bloodthirsty terrorists, whose loyalty as citizens must be questioned since they are obsessed with the destruction of the West.

Muslims in Europe and North America are aware that they have little political power to

influence the government, the media, or the elites in the West. They have very few channels of communication to policy makers. A variety of factors hamper effective participation in the political process including the lack of experience of participating in political activities, the fear of the consequences of political involvement, and lack of experience in grass roots organizations or coalition-building. They also lack seasoned leaders and efficient organizations that are able to forge coalitions with other groups in order to bring about change and influence legislation.

To Muslims in the West, the situation is becoming increasingly threatening. Azzam al-Tamimi of Britain has recently identified it as a state of crisis. Options promoted for survival of the community in the seventies have not succeeded. His assessment is that while not all of the obstacles that appear in the relations of Muslims with non-Muslims in Western societies are fostered by Muslims, the more dangerous and difficult ones are the consequence of Muslim perceptions and behaviour. Some Muslims erroneously seek to overcome these obstacles through melting into Western culture and abandoning some or all of their Islamic identity. Others insist on ignoring these obstacles by resorting to isolation and hiding in cocoons. For al-Tamimi, this discrepancy in dealing with the crisis has led to the sundering of relations between the generations. On the one hand is the generation of the fathers and mothers as well as grandparents who have an emotional and cultural tie to the original homeland and who hold on to the same customs and traditions whether or not they accord with their new environment. On the other hand is the generation of the children and grandchildren who have no emotional ties to the homeland of the fathers, and find little of value in their customs which are seen as counter-productive and an impediment to progress in the society in which they are born. Thus the new generation is in need of a new paradigm that can provide a comfort zone as it carves a space for Muslims as part and parcel of the West.

Muslim presence 'within the gates' is challenging Westerners' self-assured perceptions of their liberalism, pluralism, democracy, and tolerance. Still open to discussion is whether these Western traditions are broad enough to guarantee Muslims, not only freedom of religion and the right to propagate their faith, but also to enjoy the culture of their choice. Are Western democracies liberal enough to make room for Islamic input into the national consensus, or will there be an insistence on a Judeo-Christian culture? Will Western pluralism or multiculturalism be flexible enough to provide for Islamic input into the shaping of the future of Western society? Or will Muslims continue to be marginalized, ostracized, studied and evaluated, always judged as lacking, and always the 'other'? ♦

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#### Note

\* Syed Z. Abedin, 'The Study of Muslim Minority Problems: A Conceptual Approach', in: *Muslim communities in non-Muslim States*. London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980, p. 21.