

MUSLIMS IN EUROPE – EUROJESS Grenada august 2009

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Can Islam take root in a “Christian” Europe? The debate is often coined in these terms, in what we overhear, with yet another underlying question: can Islam be integrated into democracies?

We tend to ask ourselves if it possible to be both Muslim and European, as if these two terms were mutually exclusive. This type of question finds support in the social problems raised by North African, Pakistani, and African immigrants, their patriarchal mores that are completely at odds with “Western” values, their low level of formation, their religious attitudes that are so different from modern liberal views... As such, many consider Islam as a newcomer, radically foreign to European culture.

And yet, Islam in Europe has a long and rich history.

1 – Islam in Europe : a long and rich history

1.1.A presence in Spain and Italy that dates from long ago

I would like to begin by quoting a few lines from Volume III of the *Travels of Ibn Battuta, the Tangerian*, written in the year 1350 while the author was visiting Andalusia and Grenada where we are gathered today. I quote: “Today in Grenada I visited once again the sheikh of sheikhs, leader of the Sufis, or religious contemplatives in this city, the jurisconsult Abu ‘Ali ‘Omar, the son of the pious sheikh and saint Abuk, ‘Abdallah Mohammed, the son of Amahrouk. I spent several days in his hermitage, located outside the city, and he honored me excessively. Then I accompanied him on a visit to the well-known Zaouïa (a convent of Sufis), venerated by the public and called Rabitah Al Okab, named after the mountain that rises above the city of Grenada.”

These lines remind us that Andalusia, as well as a large part of Spain, were Muslim as early as 711, when the troops of the Berber Tariq Ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar (Jebel Tarik in Arabic) until 1492, when Grenada fell, seven centuries in all.

We also know that, after being stopped at Poitiers in October 732, Muslims settled in France, notably in Septimania, since the city of Narbonne, which had been conquered in 716, possessed a large mosque until the 12th century, and that following the “*Reconquista*”, a number of Muslims intent on escaping from Isabel the Catholic’s troops settled in the South of France. If many of them later returned to the shores of North Africa, some of them remained behind and gradually blended in with the local population.

Further East, Palermo, Sicily was also described by Ibn Hawqal as the city of 300 mosques, and once again all we need to do is to go to this city, and to Sicily in general, to see the many traces of the Near East. The Fatimid, the Shiite dynasty that reigned over North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Hedjaz from 909 to 1171, occupied Sicily from 900 until 1061

1.2. A Muslim presence linked to the Ottoman Empire

Further East, the Ottoman Empire extended to the gates of Vienna in 1683. The Ottomans were responsible for many conversions to Islam among the Slavic and Albanian populations: we must remember that even today the populations of Bosnia Herzegovina and Albania are for the most part Muslim, and important Muslim minorities exist in Macedonia, Kosovo, Greece, and Bulgaria.

In fact, the Muslim communities in the Balkans are a direct result of two processes: on the one

hand, the settling in the Balkans of Muslim populations coming from Anatolia, and later on, in the 19th century, from Crimea; and on the other hand, the conversion of local populations.

In the early stage of the Conquest, from the 14th century on, Muslim populations, encouraged by the Ottoman authorities, settled in the eastern part of the peninsula. However, on the western side of the peninsula, many conversions took place. Of course, Turkish-speaking populations came to settle here, but gradually blended in with the native populations.

This explains why Muslims there are largely Slavic-speaking, essentially in Bosnia Herzegovina, or Albanian-speaking, in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. In Crete, in the 19th century, the Greek-speaking Muslims represented 30% of the population; threatened by the persecutions organized by the Christian majority, they immigrated to Turkey at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 stipulates the mandatory exchange of the Greek and Turkish minorities.

Among other things, it is important to emphasize that populations became Muslim only after a complicated process extending over a long period of time, and rarely immediately following a conquest. Aside from the case of Bosnia Herzegovina, such a process on a massive scale often started in the 17th century, and sometimes lasted until the end of the Ottoman period. In Kosovo, for example, or in Northern Albania where Albanian Catholics converted to Islam up to the year 1912.

1.3.A presence linked to recent immigrations

The reality of European Islam is also largely characterized by a new phenomenon, that of Muslim immigrants who decide to stay in the countries that receive them. Two large groups have emerged: the Maghreb community, the majority being Moroccan and which is present in several European countries, and the Turks. But there are also Indians and Pakistanis, principally in the United Kingdom, Indonesians, present almost exclusively in the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Sub-Saharan Africans, scattered throughout France, Italy, Spain and Belgium.

We can see here the fruit of the colonial past, of labor migrations during years of economic growth, followed by family re-grouping, as well as of new trends of mobility that appeared in the 1990s: political refugees, well-educated and unwed women, and the middle classes.

Islam did therefore not appear in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. And it is important for the European memory to keep this in mind.

2 – The current statistic and socio-economic implantation of Islam in Europe

Linked to the history we have evoked very briefly, the implantation of Muslims in Europe presents us with an interesting diversity at both the statistical and socio-economic levels.

2.1. The diversity of national realities

Currently roughly 15 million Muslims live in Europe, where they represent 4% of the total population (468 million). It is extremely difficult to pinpoint this presence since the census in these countries does not take into account religious beliefs, except perhaps in Great Britain, that introduced a question regarding religious beliefs for the first time in 2001.

Based on the following tables, it can be observed that France has the greatest number of Muslims (10%), followed by the Netherlands (4.6%), Austria (4%), Belgium (3.7%) and Germany (3.2%), therefore present in the heart of the Old Continent. Bulgaria, which recently joined the European

Union, has 890 000 Muslims (11.87%), and Slovenia's account for 1.5%.

The Scandinavian countries come next with Sweden (3.1%), Denmark (2.8%) and the United Kingdom (2.5%). Southern Europe has smaller populations: Italy (1.2%) and Spain (1%). Greece has a higher percentage with 3.5%.

This ranking would be completely overturned by Turkey's joining the European Union since it has 70 million inhabitants, of which 99% are Muslims; but also by those of the other countries likely to join the EU one day. Among them, Albania (70% Muslim) or Bosnia Herzegovina (60%), whose Islamic populations and geographical situation in Europe is incontestable.

Outside the European Union, but on the European continent, Switzerland has welcomed 230 000 Muslims (3.1% of its population), Norway 50 000 (1.04%), Croatia 130 000 (3%), Serbia Montenegro 2 030 000 (19%), Macedonia 630 000 (19%), Bosnia Herzegovina 2 340 000 (60%), Albania 2 170 000 (70%), Romania 220 000 (1%), Moldavia 10 000 (0.1%), Ukraine 220 000 (0.45%) and Belorussia 10 000 (10%).

Altogether, a total of 7 900 000 Muslims are present in those countries that are likely to join the European Union.

Who are these European Muslims?

Essentially immigrants or people whose families were immigrants, even if we are witnessing a phenomenon of conversions to Islam that is considerable: for example, the figure of between 40 000 to 50 000 French converts is often put forth; 10 000 in Italy, and in Spain, 20 000.

Greek Muslims are also from populations which, even if they are of Turkish origin, settled in Thrace, in the Northwest part of the country a long time ago.

The Muslims who are either immigrants or born of immigrant parents, however, are from former colonies of the countries they live in or of which are citizens. The Muslims in France are thus primarily from Northern Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, even if there is a large population of Turkish origin settled in Alsace.

In the United Kingdom, the major part of the Muslim population is originally from the Indian sub-continent, but also from English-speaking African countries and the Middle East. The Netherlands also welcomes a number of Muslims of Indonesian origins. Finally, although Turkey was never a German colony, the historical links between the two countries certainly explains the large number of Muslims of Turkish origin settled in Germany. The close ties between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, during the time of alliances with the central empires, and the importance of the German economic interests in post-Ottoman Turkey, account for the German tropism of Turkish immigrants.

Let us also note that Spain, a former occupying force, but especially a close neighbor, welcomes mainly Muslims of Moroccan origin; Italy also has a Muslim population of Moroccan origin (32% of the Muslim population in Italy), but also of Albanian origin (29.5%), and Muslims from neighboring Tunisia account for 9.5% of the Muslim population in the country.

This national and ethnic plurality of the European Muslim community induces a wide diversity of religious practices. Without going into detail, we can safely say that all the major branches of Islam are represented in Europe:

- A minority of Shiites present particularly in Germany (19% of the Muslim population) and the United Kingdom;
- A majority of Sunnites, of different schools or rites: Maliki for the Muslims of Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, Hanafi for the Turks and Muslims of Asia (Indonesia, Pakistan), Shafi`I for Middle Eastern Muslims, and Hanbali for Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula.
- The Sufis are also represented, in the diversity of the fraternal movements.

But this wide religious diversity also implies economic statuses that are often fragile.

2.2. The fragile socio-economic status of European Muslims

The socio-economic status of European Muslims is fragile. The unemployment rate for immigrant Muslims is generally higher than the national averages: 31% and 24% for Moroccans and Turks living in the Netherlands, for example. In 1995, a study carried out by the French National Institute for Demographic Studies showed that, given the same educational background, the unemployment rate for a young person of Muslim origins was twice as high as that of a young immigrant of non-Muslim origins.

In this respect, the situation of Muslims in the United Kingdom is particularly critical. Immigrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan have an unemployment rate that is three times higher than that of minorities considered the most disadvantaged. In the centers of urban areas, close to half of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani workforce is unemployed. This marginality is transmitted to the generation born or educated in the United Kingdom: in 1991, the unemployment rate of those between 16-24 years of age of Pakistani origin was close to 36%, while the unemployment rate for "whites" (term used in the British statistics) stood at 15%. This disadvantage is not limited to unskilled labor, but is also apparent in highly-skilled fields like medicine or education.

The employment sectors for Muslim immigrants in Europe also reflect this economic fragility. They are often unqualified and unstable, and concentrated in weak economic sectors such as the automobile industry and metallurgy, industrial cleaning, textiles, or mining. In Austria, only 9.7% of the Turks are skilled, and the monthly wages of Turks and ex-Yugoslavians is 15% below that of the Austrians.

This socio-economic marginality is quite often associated with residential segregation. Data from the British census show that Pakistani immigrants occupy run-down or tenement housing. The ethnic concentration by neighborhood or building is also a factor to be considered in the heart of big towns in the UK or Germany, and in the suburbs of France.

2.3. When ethnicity rimes with poverty

Such isolation has consequences on the incorporation of Islam in Europe. The political temptation is to associate Islam with poverty, and to consider, implicitly, that Islam is responsible for this condition. Certain Muslims tend to use Islam in a defensive or reactive way. Ethnicity, then, becomes a trap when there is collusion between ethnicity, religion, and poverty. In certain situations this can lead to riots and social instability, like those that occur regularly in the United Kingdom, or as we witnessed in France in November 2005.

In the United Kingdom, the evaluation committee for community cohesion, created under the auspices of the Interior Ministry, carried out a study on the towns of Oldham, Burnley, Southall, Birmingham, and Leicester, where riots broke out during the spring of 2001. The results, made public on 11 December 2001 are preoccupying. They describe entire groups turned in on themselves

and feeling extreme frustration at the poverty and inequality they endure.

Whether it be in the area of housing, employment, schooling, or social services, the study paints a picture of an England highly differentiated for racial and religious reasons that are closely linked to each other. The response to this dominant anti-Muslim racism takes the form of communities turning in on themselves and, in some cases, of a reactive use of Islam.

Without reaching this degree of segregation, the ethnic perception of social difference is also largely present in urban areas in France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In France. This is shown by a concentration in the suburbs of the poorest sectors of the population of which the majority are Muslims. Most of the time, ethnicity corresponds to a way of defining oneself, and of being defined by others, as Arab, North African, or Muslim based on just one differentiator: physical appearance, or religion, without this translating systematically into specific cultural behavior patterns. For instance, the reference to a group of young people from all different origins can be a determining factor in the way they identify themselves: the popularity of rap illustrates this very well.

For the new generations of North African origin, ethnicity evokes an experience of difference and discrimination (racism, social exclusion), linked to a cultural loss. No longer resembling Arabs or Algerians in the way they live, it is obvious that this origin is very present as a stigmatism in their daily relationships.

Such a stand-off can explain the violent and sporadic forms of protest, such as the “rodeos” in Les Minguettes, the riots in Vaux en Velin in 1989, or more recently those that took place in November 2005 when the youth were victims of racial crimes or police discrimination. But this violence is contained and limited, without any comparison to large-scale revolts that occur from time to time in large American cities, such as in Los Angeles in 1992.

The relatively peaceful society can be explained by the fact that these neighborhoods are rarely isolated. Public powers represented by social workers and police officers are largely represented. Local governments have contributed to maintaining a peaceful environment by subsidizing – sometimes generously – a certain number of activities. In November 2005, those neighborhoods that remained calm were those that benefited from this type of attention.

In conclusion, I would like to point out three challenges that need to be addressed by European Muslims: first of all, the creation of an authentically European Islam; secondly, the adaptation of religious law (fatwas) to European context; and thirdly, citizenship and social belonging. Developing these challenges would be the subject of a whole other conference.

In any case, two objective observations allow us to depict the Muslim presence in Europe. After being present for 40 years in Europe, Western Europe, Muslims generally have the right to practice their religion in peace, to build mosques – even if administrative red tape can be rather trying – and to found Islamic (Muslim) organizations, all of which proves perhaps that the European constitutions and legislation respect Islam as a religion and Muslims as believers.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Europe live in an secure, peaceful atmosphere when it comes to religious matters. Many Muslims have been able to call upon the Law after having suffered from an injustice, and in many cases justice has leaned in their favor. We must not confuse social, economic, and political problems such as unemployment, poverty, exclusion, or increasing racism, inflicted on an entire part of the Muslim population, with what could be genuine religious discrimination, even if this does exist as well.

Hence there is a peaceful climate which allows for a tranquil adaptation of Islam and Muslims in

Europe, while taking into account the specific European context. Even if studies show a re-birth of faith among young people, or a sincere attachment during important moments, such as Ramadan, they also show some surprising results. In France, 80% of all Muslims do not practice their religion on a regular basis and do not pray daily. Less than 40% attend the Friday prayer at the mosque, even though 70% fast during the month of Ramadan.

The European context is one in which Muslims find themselves in a minority position and in a climate that is much more secularized than elsewhere. This allows a European Islam to think of itself and shape itself in new ways, in the diversity of the institutional contexts proper to each country. This ongoing innovation will and does have an influence on the Muslim world – Arab and non-Arab – as a whole. This is an evolution that should be examined attentively now and in the near future.