

## Islam in a More Conservative Western World

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My findings are tentative and subject to further research. This presentation rests on three paradoxes of great relevance to Muslims in the West. The first paradox is that, from the point of views of Muslims in the West, western secularism might be good news and western materialism might be bad news. In other words, western secularism is perhaps a blessing in disguise for Muslims, whereas western materialism is a curse. The second paradox is that recent Republican, rather than Democratic, foreign policy has been more friendly to Muslims, whereas Democratic, rather than Republican, domestic policies are probably more friendly to Muslims. The third paradox concerns the two Islams in the United States: indigenous and immigrant. In the United States, western secularism has protected minority religious groups by insisting on the separation of church and state. This is as major reason why American Jews have been among the greatest defenders of the separation of church and state, for any breach could lead to the imposition of some practices of the religious majority, such as forcing Jewish children to participate in Christian prayers at school.

The secular state permits religious minorities to practice their religions in relative peace. Of course, like all doctrines, secularism has its fanatics who sometimes want to degrade, rather than protect, the sacred. But at its best, a secular state is a refuge of safety for minority religions. It is in this sense that western secularism is a friend of Muslims living in the West.

But while secularism represents a divorce from formal religion, materialism is a dilution of spirituality. One can be without a formal religion and still be deeply spiritual in a humanistic sense. John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, for example, had no formal religion, yet each had deeply spiritual values. Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Laureate for Peace and an eventual agnostic, remained deeply committed to the principle of reverence for life, even to the extent of protecting the lives of insects in Africa.

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Religion has been declining in influence in the West ever since the days of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. However, it is mainly in the twentieth century that spirituality has taken a nose-dive. The West has become not only less religious, but dangerously less spiritual; not only more secular, but dangerously more materialistic. It is this materialism that is a danger to Muslims living in the West: the materialism of excessive acquisitiveness (greed), excessive consumption (consumerism), excessive sexuality (of the flesh), excessive self-indulgence (aberrant individualism). These four forms of materialism could result in a hedonistic way of life, a pleasure-seeking career. What is more, western materialism is likely to influence the socialization and upbringing of the next generation of Muslim children and expose them to excessive levels of acquisitiveness, consumerism, and diverse forms of sexuality. It is because of these considerations that Islam within the western world is threatened less by western secularism than by western materialism.

Moreover, there are also political and ideological power shifts now underway in the western world between liberals and conservatives, Tories and Socialists, Democrats and Republicans. In many western countries, it is not simply a case of more a conservative party winning elections—the whole political system in France and Britain is moving to the right. What used to be major socialist or internationalist parties have not only shrunk in support, but have also diluted their left-wing orientation. A party of the right may lose an election, as the Tory party is likely to do in Britain in the next general election, but it will lose to a Labour Party that is much more conservative today than it was thirty or fifty years ago. Indeed, the leader of the British Labour Party wants to drop clause four of the party's constitution, a clause that for so long committed it to the socialist ambition of nationalizing the means of production, distribution, and exchange. In France, socialist President Mitterand is dying, and so is his old style of socialism. The system has not only moved to the right, but has become a little more racist. There is also more Islamophobia in France than at any other time in the twentieth century.

What about the United States? Is it simply a case of Republicans winning control of Congress, or are all three branches of government moving to the right with only minor variations between the two parties? Is the American system as a whole turning conservative? How is this going to affect Muslims? In France, the move to the right has triggered a degree of xenophobia and hostility toward foreigners. French cultural xenophobia has included Islamophobia. In Germany, xenophobia has included Turkophobia, which, in turn, has included elements of Islamophobia.

In the United States, changes in regime between Republicans and Democrats have had historic paradoxes. In Middle Eastern politics, past Republican administrations have sometimes shown a greater ability to stand up to Israel than have Democratic administrations. In 1956, Republican president Eisenhower insisted on an end to the occupation of parts of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel and compelled the Israelis to withdraw

from the Sinai, which they had occupied during the Suez War of 1956. It was Republican president Bush who refused to continue to allow the indirect use of American money for illegal settlements on occupied Arab land. Bush also led Desert Storm in 1991, but perhaps no American president, regardless of political affiliation, would have allowed Iraq to annex Kuwait. What is more, a Democratic president might have authorized a march to Baghdad.

On the other hand, Democratic president Truman gave the American green light in 1947 for the creation of the state of Israel, thereby setting the stage for fifty years of Arab–Israeli wars, Palestinian suffering, and mutual hatred. It was Democratic president Johnson who helped Israel win the Six Day War of 1967 that resulted in the occupation of Gaza, the Sinai, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank. It was also Democratic president Clinton who came closer than any American president to giving silent legitimation to Jewish settlements in the occupied Arab territories. On the other hand, it was Republican president Nixon who was sympathetic to Pakistan in the Indo-Pakistani conflict (he was hated thereafter in India).

What this means is that in foreign policy, Republicans have so far been greater friends of the Muslim world. In domestic terms, however, the Democratic party is the party of minorities and, although Muslims have not emerged as an explicit political minority, the party most likely to be sensitive to domestic diversity is the Democratic party. If Muslims are discriminated against or harassed within the United States, the Democrats are more likely to come to their aid than the Republicans. The Clinton administration's proposed antiterrorist legislation is probably both a matter of domestic and foreign policy. The divide between Republicans and Democrats is therefore uneven. In such countries as Britain, France, and Germany, *both* Islam as a civilization and local Muslims as residents are regarded as foreign even if they are citizens of European countries. In the United States, however, half of all Muslims will soon consist of descendants of families who have been American for centuries. Already, 42 percent of American Muslims are African-American. This creates a situation that is different from that of Europe, for it is becoming increasingly difficult to consider American Muslims as "foreign."—especially when they are seen to consist of millions of individuals who have been part of American history for two or three centuries.

But even with the immigrant half of the Muslim population of the United States, they are operating in a country of immigrants anyhow, unlike immigrant Muslims in France, Britain, and Germany. In the United States, it has been possible for an immigrant with a heavy foreign accent to become the most outstanding nonpresidential American statesman of the second half of the twentieth century, namely, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's brilliant secretary of state. So even immigrant Muslims are, in that special American sense, less foreign than Muslim immigrants in Europe. But, there is no doubt that the reality that the United States faces a "tale of two Islams":

**Indigenous American Islam**

Followers are mainly African-Americans and a small percentage of Euro-Americans.

Highly sensitive to issues of domestic American policy.

Proportion of low-income families is above the national average.

Overwhelmingly unilingual (in either standard or dialect English or both) but learning Arabic for Islamic rituals.

New to Islam but old to the United States (though Islam arrived here in chains).

Economically weak but potentially politically powerful.

Rebelling against the American dream.

Growth rate may increase as a result of the Newt Gingrich revolution against minorities and affirmative action. Newt may be good news for indigenous Islam.

**Immigrant American Islam**

Followers are mainly from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Highly sensitive to issues of American foreign policy.

Proportion of professional class is above national average.

Overwhelmingly bilingual and, in some cases, trilingual (English with Arabic and/or other Asian or African languages). Some professionals are Euro-bilingual.

New to the United States but old to Islam.

Politically weak but potentially economically influential.

Pursuing the American dream.

Growth rate may decline as a result of Newt Gingrich's and right-wing's assaults on new immigration.

Together, these two sets of Muslims are already being slowly forged into the largest Muslim nation in the western hemisphere. An Islamic presence in the Americas is being felt at long last.