

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

Symposium on Muslims in Europe

**The Institute for Comparative Social Research
and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany**

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The question of a Muslim minority in the Western context has become an important one in view of some fear-and-hysteria literature that continues to depict this minority as a threat to Western liberal values and sociopolitical systems. The conference papers were structured around a basic theme of “Muslims, Islam, and Diaspora,” which reveals the difficulty of European scholars as well as government officials in accurately conceptualizing the Muslim experience of immigration in the West.

To be sure, there is no concept of an eschatological “promised land” or “holy land” in the Qur’an to suggest “diaspora” — the dispersion of its adherents from it — even in the remotest sense of the term. The entire earth, according to the Qur’an, belongs to God and has been created for humanity to seek its own advancement towards the moral and spiritual goals wherever it so chooses, as long as no injustices are committed against fellow humans beings. The concept of *dār al hijrah*, on the other hand, captures the spirit of Muslim emigration to the West. It is a journey undertaken to overcome spiritual and moral “homelessness,” a physical transferral to the sphere which holds out the promise of alleviating the unfavorable conditions prevalent in one’s own place of domicile. To this early meaning of emigration (*hijrah*) of a person from a particular place or set of surroundings to seek protection is added emigration for the sake of economic advantage, either temporarily or permanently, somewhere else. In other words, for Muslims this sphere of emigration is not what Europe wants to perceive, namely, a “diaspora” that would make them endeavor to return from the “diaspora” to their “holy land” located somewhere in Arabia.

Apart from this lack of conceptual clarity in categorizing the Muslims’ perception of their spatial relationship in the West, European scholars and administrators are faced with another difficulty. This was discussed by Reinhard Schulze following his paper on “International Organization and Muslims in Europe.” Schulze pointed out the inadequacy with which Europe defines the word “religion” and then imposes it on Islam, expecting to discover a central Islamic “church” headed by a Muslim “bishop” with whom the government can establish administrative relations. Even more difficult for homogenous European nations like France, where the majority is Catholic, is to recognize the existence of other “religions” besides Christianity for administrative purposes. This difficulty is self-created, because such recognition entails empowering the followers of other

traditions and making the necessary constitutional changes to accommodate new exigencies created by the rising power of the Muslim minority. The “church-state” distinction and separation in the American constitution that has made things easier and far more manageable vis-à-vis the rights of religious minorities in that country is virtually nonexistent in European national and political culture. This does not mean that Europe refuses to recognize the existence of minorities within its homogenous population; it just simply does not have the constitutional mechanism to integrate the Muslim minority as part of its sociopolitical universe.

Jeroen Doornik (Holland) and Ake Sander (Sweden) provided a survey of the constitutional measures by which the integration of Muslims into these two countries has been handled. They also mentioned that some citizens, who view accommodation as a “threat” to their “homogeneous” existence, have opposed these measures. Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld (Holland) provided a perceptive picture of the problems faced by European constitutions seeking to facilitate the integration process in his well-researched paper on “Imams and Islamic Holidays in Dutch Jurisprudence and Political Discussions: Two Aspects of an Unfinished Integration Process.” It is pertinent to point out here that one of the great difficulties European governments face in giving due recognition to Muslim holidays is the lunar calendar. The existence of this difficulty, in spite of the scientific data available to determine Muslim holidays in advance (at least annually), is a sad state of affairs in this day and age. In the aftermath of the Rushdie affair (1988) and the Gulf War (1991), Muslims in Europe (after the Bradford affair of England and their seemingly wholehearted support for Saddam Hussein, whether actual or perceived, as reported in the Western media) are more or less viewed as a menace to the liberal democratic values of the West. This prejudicial treatment of the Muslim minority has had repercussions in acts of violence against them in many parts of Europe.

The conference devoted a great deal of time to practical issues connected with the full integration of Muslims in the West. A basic concern expressed by the delegates was that there is a conspicuous absence of central religious leadership among Muslims. The religious leadership provided by the imams in the home countries is both intellectually and socially ill-equipped to direct the adjustment of Muslims in their newly adopted social universe. Sander raised the possibility of founding an Islamic university in Europe that would instruct the new religious leaders on how to guide Muslim integration in the Western environment. In fact, this appeared to be the proposal of the Institute’s director, Jochen Blaschke, who believes that training imams in the West would alleviate the self-imposed alienation perpetuated by imams coming from the Islamic world.

The other important issue was Islamic religious education in the public education system. Felice Dassetto (Belgium) gave an overview of the ways in which the Belgian government had integrated Islamic education in its school system and provides a state budget for the program. Such an integration was unique

to Belgium; Germany is still debating the issue. Perhaps the issue that was on the minds of every delegate was the Muslims' reaction, at times violent, to political upheavals in their native countries and the inability of European governments to find local Muslim leaders, rather than Middle Eastern ambassadors, who could help them sort out the Muslim minority's political and related problems.

Among the academics, there was a genuine concern to create better opportunities for Muslims in the Christian world. This concern was reflected in the presentation by Christoph Elsas and Claire de Galember.

The most useful and hotly debated sessions were the panels on Friday and Saturday evenings. On Friday evening Barbara John (Senate Secretary for Foreigners' Affairs of Germany) appeared with Yahya Schulske (Islamic Federation), Reinhard Schulz (Islamic Studies Department, Ruhr University, Bochum), and Mehmet Ozmen (Turkish Islamic Union) to discuss "Politics and Religion in Diaspora Islam." Many of the above-mentioned issues were voiced by Muslim participants and were answered judiciously by Ms. John. On Saturday evening, Christoph Elsas (theologian), Emine Demirbukan (Consultant for Foreigner's Affairs, Schoneberg), and Salim N. Abdullah (Islamic Archives, Soest) appeared on the panel "Perspectives of Multicultural Policy: Islam, Christianity and Secularized Culture." This was the time to consider the culture war that is going on across the Western world, including North America, to define the values and future direction of the next generation of world citizens.

Besides some interesting papers on the spread of the Ahmadiyya movement in Europe, one oddity in the conference was the presence of the Ahmadiyya sect leaders and their continuous efforts at "preaching" and "converting" others to their version of Islam. Even more strange was the paper on "Bahai in Diaspora." What connection the Bahais have with a Muslim minority in Europe was not clear, to me at least. Other papers dealt with the relations between Islam and Christianity, Isma'ilis in Great Britain, and Islamic movements in Hungary.

The symposium was very important in that it covered a wide variety of topics related to the questions of immigration, ethnicity, Muslim-owned businesses, perspectives on multicultural policy, and so on. It was also beneficial as regards the exchange of views between conference participants, both at the conference and at other times during the three days, and the general audience. Hamid Algar was, unfortunately, unable to present his paper on "The Religion of Islam in Diaspora," which was to include a statement on Islam in North America. However, in my lecture on "Islam, Muslims and Diaspora," I covered the common ground shared by all Muslims in the West, including North America.

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