



European Ideas Network

# Integration and inclusion: What policies towards Islam?

Comments

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## Becoming European along with Our Islamic Brothers

These sessions were an apt continuation of the auspicious discussion begun on January 26<sup>th</sup>. Starting with Walid Phares' analysis of the complexities involved in obtaining an accurate picture of Islam today that was as brilliantly learned as it was politically relevant, a series of distinguished scholars, politicians and community leaders, both religious and secular, stressed the need on the part of Europeans to make crucial distinctions in their thinking about Islam, which sets Jihadism into a religious and sociological context in such a way as to clarify both its scope within Muslim communities and its relation smouldering desires for political emancipation in the Islamic world. First, we need to distinguish between the Islamic religion and the politics of Islamists. Second we need to differentiate between the various segments within European Islamic communities; their religious leadership, the 5-8% radical Islamist minority, their significant moderate element and a large silent majority. Third, we need to distinguish legitimate strivings for democratic reform from fundamentalist radicalism – Ms. Arfaoui's moving remarks about the way that recent events in Tunisia represent a democratic political awakening in the Arab world were unforgettable. In any case, the crucial thing for Europeans is to resist tendencies to think of Islam in a reified, monolithic way. Geographically, sociologically and theologically Islamic communities are divided in ways that are often far from apparent to European observers. The speakers really did a superb job of opening our eyes to what we need to look for if we are to see the Muslim communities throughout the world in a way that transcends cliché. In this effort we need to understand ideas as well as get the facts right. The breakfast and seminar provided ample evidence that there is a more than significant overlap in shared values that can become the basis for interfaith and intercultural dialogue if we know where to look for it. It was emphasized by Wilfried Martens and others that the Christian duty to fraternal love requires us as Christian Democrats to exert ourselves to identify and connect with our Muslim brethren of good faith, whom, Imam Pallavicini reminded us, are also anxious to meet us in an ecumenical encounter, which has a political as well as a religious dimension.

At the same time both Professor Phares and Dr. Bouloudhine reminded us that establishing dialogue is not as simple as it sounds. For starters, Prof. Phares related that counter-jihadists are all too little recognised and unfunded within Islamic communities, something that hinders potential dialogue with them. Dr. Bouloudhine passionately described the distressing plight of the secular Muslims in France as they struggle for visibility and to have an impact upon civil society. The efforts of this group of engaged professionals to make their presence felt in the public sphere as responsible citizens has met with little response either from politics or from the media. Thus the efforts of a significant segment of the Muslim silent majority to find a voice in this particular instance are indicative of limitations of vision within parliamentary parties that simply fail to perceive what an important opportunity they present to transform the clichéd narrative about Islam and western values. Thus, if it sometimes seems difficult to detach Islam from extremism in western eyes and equally difficult for Muslims to grasp that the West or Christianity or democracy is not at war with them, it is ever bit as difficult, if not more so, for secular professional Muslims in France to come into the public eye as responsible citizens. Unfortunately, France is not alone in that respect. In Austria, for example, the furore that surrounded the publication of Thilo Sarrazin's book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Abolishes Itself) presenting Islam as a danger to the very Germanness of German society included television news programs reporting on statements from the Muslim community in which one saw one of the rarest phenomena to appear in the Austrian media: a Muslim businessman. Dr. Bouloudhine's problems are not restricted to France. The moral to that story has implications for Christian Democratic policy in Europe.

In the New Testament we are challenged to respond to the question of how we can love God, whom we do not see, if we do not love our neighbour, whom we do see. Fulfilling our Christian duties to fraternal love implies that we can see our neighbour. It should be a priority of the European People's Party to do everything in its power to provide visibility to well-integrated members of the European Muslim community as a reminder to both Europeans and to immigrants from the Muslim world that there is no contradiction whatsoever in being Muslim and European even if there may be tensions in developing a European identity. We forget at our peril that developing a genuinely European identity has not proved to be simple in the case of Europeans, who cling more desperately to their national identities than they should.

We forget at our peril that there is still much to be done to make Europeans comfortable with their European identity. Creating a European identity is a project that we all must be involved in. It is certainly more dramatic to immigrants to add a new layer as it were to their identity but they share more with European nationals with respect to becoming full-fledged European citizens exercising civic responsibility than the latter often think. At the first of the EIN seminars on the theme "Integration and Inclusion" on January 26, 2011 Dirk Hudig suggested that in the face of the local nature of problems of integration, i.e., implying that according to the principle of subsidiarity they were matters for action on the part of the national states, the European parliament should urge a policy direction upon national Christian Democratic parties that should have a "cascading" effect down to the local level. The question of giving a voice and visibility to the more or less invisible integrated Muslims in Europe should most definitely be included in that program. This is of particular importance to young Europeans of all backgrounds; for they will need to get along better with one another in the future even more than we do today.