



European Ideas Network

Integration and inclusion: What policies towards Islam?

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Religious Identity in Secular Europe: Integration or Discrimination against Islam?

The future of Europe will be determined by the degree of awareness that European citizens are able to acquire as guardians of the heritage of religious, political and cultural experience that the peoples of this continent have built up over the centuries.

It is, in fact, the new generations in Europe that have the great responsibility to interpret the encounter of their own specific personal journey with the different spiritual and social expressions that have enriched the history of humanity in this part of the world.

Unity in diversity, without either confusion or limits to the dynamic of the encounter, dialogue, comparison and exchange: this ought to be the principle characterizing relations between the youth and adults of Europe, without discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic group, gender, cultural or religion.

This is the founding principle of Europe, which is based on respect for the pluralism and freedom of expression of the various identities present in the continent.

Can one be religious at all in a modern and integrated Europe?

The interpretation of these noble principles and how they should be transferred into a concrete form, with all Europeans becoming aware of them, is still a matter for debate. The discussion regarding the models of integration in Europe has drawn attention to various experiments, not always successful, as for example multiculturalism in Britain or the emphasis on laicism in France.

Both these models have sought to deal with cultural and religious diversity by creating the rules that allow the system of a secularized society to keep the spiritual dimension clearly separate from temporal power.

The quest — often obsessive and artificial — for this separation originated to a certain extent from a reaction to the poor management of civil power on the part of the religious institutions that, over the centuries, have influenced the culture and government of the nations, exploiting the mystery of the faith for reasons of state or personal power. This reaction has led to a radical overturn of the temporal power, which, freed from its dependence on religious doctrine, has, with excessive zeal, promoted a culture and a policy of emancipation from this doctrine and the spiritual dimension, engaging in a struggle against religion, regarded as ‘the opium of the people’.

Modernity, laicism, democracy, capitalism and communism are, at least in part, the result of this change in the political and cultural perspective that put man and the people at the centre of the nation and, at the same time, identified reason and economic progress as the constitutive principles of the new ‘civil society’, replacing the doctrine inspired by theological reflection and the organization of the crafts guilds of the traditional cultures.

The conflict between state and church — or between democracy and the papacy — led to the reformulation of the competences, even though the way the criteria of this relationship were redesigned was complex and differed from one part of Europe to another.

In Britain, the schism with the Catholic Church and the establishment of Protestantism as the state religion were at least partially favourable to a new relationship between religion and government. This was probably facilitated by Protestantism’s greater sensibility to and sympathy with the reformist and progressive philosophy typical of the modern world.

In France, the subsequent development of the revolution led to rationalization and laicism, creating the basis of a type of nationalism where the practice of religion was relegated exclusively to the private sphere.

It is curious to note that it was, above all, these two powers that were responsible for the colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, often with the pretext of exporting their own model of culture and civilization and imposing this on the 'savages' living in these conquered lands. This was a model of thought and government that, besides being characterized by the use of military force, also offered the peoples of the rest of the world the opportunity to end the traditional unity between spirituality and reason and overturn the hierarchical relationship of sages and bureaucrats, introducing the correct management of power and the distribution of welfare among all the citizens of the colony.

Integration issues in Europe: challenges for citizens of the Muslim faith.

Is your faith relevant in the modern world?

This historical premise allows us to better contextualize the situation that Europe has had to deal with in the delicate relationship between temporal power and the spiritual authorities.

Today there is the new phenomenon of immigrants belonging to different cultures and religions arriving in Europe; these are people who seek to participate in the economic and social welfare of our secularized societies, but who come from countries where this rift between religion and politics has not occurred. They have not participated in any process of cultural emancipation and often belong to religions that are not organized with a structure similar to that of the Catholic Church and are not headed by a single figure like the pope. They are people who share a spiritual, intellectual and social identity that is different from that which westerners, the children of modernity, have developed hitherto.

How can these citizens be integrated? Must we accept their presence only insofar as they are useful for our economic development, preventing them from integrating into European society? Must we hope that they return to their countries or ought we to build urban peripheries for them or housing schemes where they can be ghettoized, thus avoiding excessive contact with European civilization? Or should we adopt the model of the American melting pot, creating the premises for the cultural homogenization where everyone must identify with the universal values of a democratic and secularized Europe? And, above all, how can it bring about in their regard the change of mentality from tradition to modernity, from sacred to profane, from religion to laicism and from government by sages to government by the people?

The complexity of these questions, which have been raised by many European politicians and sociologists, highlights the difficulty that they have when tackling the cultural and religious diversity in a continent where perhaps they had hoped to have resolved once and for all the problem of the relations between religion and politics, confining the Catholic Church to the Vatican and granting religious freedom to the priests in the parishes.

A religious community that instead lives its spirituality in every aspect of its public and private life, that does not limit itself to a weekly ritual and that interprets religion, above all, as a way of orienting existence, including the political, social, family and cultural dimensions, perhaps runs the risk of challenging some of the characteristics of the western way of life.

There is, in other words, a lack of the cultural background that would allow the making of juridical adjustments to take into account the diversity of the structural and organizational aspects of other religions, in addition to the Catholic one, in order to ensure that these communities, too, may be integrated into contemporary western society. At times it almost seems as if antireligious intolerance were emerging again on the part of those who hoped to emancipate the new Europe from the ancient beliefs in the transcendental with the adoption of nihilism and pragmatism as the predominant doctrines of a civilization they believed to be more advanced.

In this regard, studies have been made and laws enacted limiting the right to publicly manifest religious feelings and symbols considered, wrongly, as ostentatious and offensive to the sensibility of ordinary people. The religious identity is contrasted with a lay identity based on an abstract interpretation of the neutrality of the public space, thus creating unjustified limits and discriminating obstacles to the religious freedom of believers in Europe.

Can authentic devotees of a religion live their faith with full dignity in Europe? When this question is asked by Muslims, the reply is often influenced by aspects that further complicate the harmony and clarity of the relationship between religion and politics in European society today. These aspects are illegal immigration, national security, international terrorism and an infinite number of news items caused by social hardships, exacerbation of prejudices, the diffusion of stereotypes, the instrumental use of wrong interpretations and, to put it briefly, the ignorance and dishonesty of some individuals who have captured the media's attention.

The influence of radical religious fractions

As a European Muslim, I have always condemned the barbaric use of the pseudo-culture of hate fostered by the fundamentalists to legitimate a formalist interpretation of our religious doctrine. This is, in fact, exploited and vulgarized in order to promote the violent utopia of an Islamization of society that is anything but authentically Islamic. There is no doubt that that this attempt to follow in the footsteps of a popular revolution or religious crusade in order to organize a nationalistic and Panislamic campaign of brainwashing intended to incite the new generations of Muslims against the imperialism of the West seems particularly powerful. But this is not a valid reason for subordinating the rights of millions of Muslims in Europe to the solution of the conflict in the Middle East or the cessation of the dangers linked to Islamic terrorism.

Islamophobia in Europe. Do you conceal your religious identity?

Recently the category of the 'moderate' has been created in Italy: with this it is claimed that it is possible to distinguish 'good' Muslims from the 'bad' ones. The risk of this approach may be seen in the imprecise definition of moderation, so that the moderate is often regarded not so much as a person who is rightly distinct and distant from any fundamentalist extremism but rather as one who, 'although he is a Muslim', has a liberal, reformist, critical and protestant vision of religion. The negative consequence of this lies in the confusion that is caused by the identity of the religious Muslim who, if he does not adhere to the model the westerner has in mind, inevitably becomes a dangerous individual, even if he fully respects the European legal and cultural systems.

This distorted view of things represents, in my opinion, the most worrying sign of Islamophobia, which may be regarded as a phobia of religion, cultural diversity and the mysterious East, a phobia resulting from the erroneous association of Muslims with terrorism.

This Islamophobia often has nothing to do with Islam, but rather with ignorance of Islam, or with another kind of phobia: the fear of diversity, the fear that the identity of a person different from ourselves can challenge our certainties about the western identity. In the case of some people, this phobia becomes a persecution complex or fear of any encounter with those who, apparently, besides not speaking their language, have a completely different mentality. Thus another harmful association is created based on the concept of foreigner, the phobia of the foreigner coming from the East, the phobia of the religious foreigner, the phobia of the religious foreigner having a faith different from Christianity, the phobia of the religious foreigner with a faith that is not compatible with the separation of the spiritual and temporal powers. This foreigner is an individual alien to the characteristics of the contemporary western system: is the answer integration or expulsion?

It is paradoxical to have to admit that this alienness is also attributed to European Muslims, who may originate from this continent or be the second or third generation of families immigrating from elsewhere. This demonstrates that, while the phenomenon of immigration and terrorism have in part contributed to foment and exacerbate this belief, the real crux of the problem seems to be linked to the degree to which a new religious identity may be integrated into the post-modern West.

Certain aspects of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism conceal the identity crises of some individuals who cyclically cannot tolerate expression of identity that do not conform to the common way of thinking and the absolutization of the dominant cultural model. Sometimes they decide to remove the nonconforming identities through genocide, ethnic cleansing or racial laws in order to defend themselves and avoid problems.

The identity of Muslims, Christians and Jews in Europe is that of men and women who believe in certain spiritual principles, universal values and doctrinal rules: they are born and grow up, study and work, and love and pray beside their fellow citizens, respecting the laws of their state and contributing to the wealth of their society and the culture of their people. Their communities are an integral part of the civil society, their religion is an integral part of the European confessional pluralism and their culture is an integral part of western multiculturalism.

The identity of Muslims, Christians and Jews in Europe is that of men and women who are heirs to a specific genetic, family and traditional legacy, which they naturally share and relay as added value for the development of European society. For believers, their identity is one that derives its inspiration and ontological form from the decree of the Creator, who has given man the miraculous gift of life, the breath of the spirit that guides the actions of his creatures in their worldly tasks. The national identity of any European country does not seem to be in contrast with the identity of a religious person. On the contrary, the national and religious specificities are naturally compatible and complementary even in a secular state, as they ought to be in a confessional state, if both systems are consistent in their respect for religious and cultural freedom and diversity, avoiding any discrimination.

The problems only come to light when intolerant exclusivism emerges on the part of lay or religious people who unjustly want to oblige others to abjure, convert, assimilate and integrate, even if they are unwilling to do so.

Do your religious and national identities conflict or overlap?

In the case of European Muslims, religious doctrine and the duties of citizenship are perfectly combined: from a religious point of view, Muslims are naturally inclined to respect all their fellow citizens, whatever their faith or culture may be, and, at the same time, contribute actively to the development of their country of origin or adoption. Thus a Muslim should be prepared to defend the other religious identities, promote social justice and set an example of good citizenship and solidarity for the weakest sections of society. In no case may religious motives be adopted as a pretext for justifying an illegal action or an attack on the country's legal system.

At the same time, the European institutions must be made aware of the need to defend the cultural and religious minorities from verbal aggression and assaults of xenophobic and exclusivist groups that provoke and attack Jews and Muslims, and immigrants and religious people with arrogance and violence.

The antidote to the much-feared clash between civilizations may be found by investing in intercultural education, together with education for religious pluralism, democratic citizenship, peace and international cooperation, especially in the Euro-Mediterranean context. These branches of education will be able to guarantee the training of the new European leaders, giving them the capacity to avoid conflicts — whether they be on a verbal level or actual wars — between nations. At the same time, severer laws with regard to all types of discrimination, abuse of power and

psychological violence should reduce the danger of fundamentalist groups by isolating them, thus ensuring greater security.

It is necessary, therefore, to create a new European model of culture and citizenship open to the contribution of the religious traditions and closed to instrumental use by fanatics: this model would harmoniously combine spirituality and civilization, faith and reason. All too often we witness a conflict between rationalists and fundamentalists who insist that only their own point of view or religion is valid, denying, on the one hand, that religious people have the capacity to reason or, on the other, that atheists are worthy of respect from believers. Pope Benedict XVI's lecture in Regensburg highlighted the need to redesign or update a method of interreligious dialogue between believers in Europe so that it will be capable of clarifying the natural relationship that exists in every believer between faith and reason; transcendence and immanence; contemplation and action; theology, philosophy and thought; inspiration, content and form; mystery, symbol and ritual; and spirit, soul and body.

It is certainly up to the youth of Europe — Jews, Christians and Muslims — to contribute to the sensibility towards, awareness of and harmony between religious devotion and the responsibility of citizens living in the contemporary world. This is not a case of adopting formalism expressing nostalgia for the past, nor of launching into a sort of common language or New Age syncretism that confuses the distinguishing features of every religious doctrine and every traditional culture. It is necessary to make the most of the intellectual heritage of the masters and the historical memory of the past in order to bring this knowledge up to date, playing our role as witnesses of a sacred deposit and of social progress that is able to benefit from the conquests and errors of humanity. Thus we must learn to share the spirit of fraternal collaboration and empathy and promote the development of an ethic that is the basis of democratic citizenship founded on respect for the identity of the men and women who, in the new Europe, decide to live with dignity and transparency according to a religious, intrareligious and interreligious perspective in their public and private activities.

May God bless you and guide you to success in this world and the other.

Assalamu alaykum. May peace be with you.