

SECULAR EXTREMISM IN EUROPE

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Muslim Identity in Europe

Islamophobia seems to have become a new norm in France. From a larger perspective, it can be seen that Muslim identity is facing negative attitudes in modern Europe. Islam and Muslim communities are increasingly being attacked under the guise of the right to expression. Religious tolerance, pluralism, and democracy seem to have lost their meanings in the continent. The treatment towards Islam and Muslim communities in Europe is proving a litmus test to liberty, democratic and pluralistic values that the Western society claims to promote.

The emergence of discrimination in Europe since the last few months witnesses a new chapter in the history of secular extremism. There, secular extremism has posed a question on its democratic and secular values; whether Europe could successfully represent its Muslim minority or not? The main challenge for Europe

right now is its Muslim representation. Though a large number of Muslim populations are present in Western countries, they are being excluded in Europe in an unusual way. There are many positive liberal voices being raised for Muslim immigrants, but they are very weak. The optimistic liberal voices of Europe suggest Muslims not to fear the consequences of prejudice they are subject to in Western societies. They feel that Muslim immigrants can easily assimilate into European society. Their belief in ideas like tolerance and equality is the basis for their argument that only the extreme right of Europe has a problem with Muslims and Islam.

The major challenge for contemporary Europe is the representation of diverse cultures of which Muslims are a significant part right now. Western propagandist media has coined a new term, the so-called "Muslim question" of present-day



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Europe. Many European leaders try to address this question by waging a war under the guise of secular ideas like the right to expression. Secular crusades like this will never solve this question. The question requires an answer with a true sense of respect towards the minority cultures within European borders.

Understanding European Identity

Before answering the question of minority representation in Europe hence the representation of Muslim immigrants, in particular, one feels a dire need of understanding the European Identity. The very notion that European identity deals merely with rights, obligations, and loyalties towards a nation has complicated this idea of identity further. This discourse of a European identity holds a sense of anxiety towards non-Europeans, excluding them from this identity. Muslims, irrespective of their roots in Asia, Africa, or any other part of the globe, are excluded from this identity. Muslims may live in Europe but are not considered of it, even if they may not have migrated to Europe from any other part of the world. It is a matter of fact that Muslims from Balkan societies are not expected to claim their “Europeanness”, even if they may have adopted secular political institutions. There is a strong perception across Europe that Muslims are external to the essence of Europe. “For both liberals and the extreme right the representation of “Europe” takes the form of a narrative, one of whose effects is to exclude Islam. I do not mean by this that both sides are equally hostile toward Muslims living in Europe. Nor do I assume that Muslim immigrants are in no way responsible for their practical predicament. I mean only that for liberals no less than for the extreme right, the narrative of Europe points to the idea of an unchangeable essence.”¹

For many Western scholars, “civilization” is not a fashionable term to which Europe could be referred. Instead, they insist on certain experiences which Europeans share. Michael Wintle is one among such scholars who object to the term “civilization” to be applied to Europe. “To talk in terms of a quintessential or single European culture, civilization or identity

leads quickly to unsustainable generalization, and to all manner of heady and evidently false claims for one’s own continent. Nonetheless, if the triumphalism can be left to one side there is a long history of shared influences and experiences, a heritage, which has not touched all parts of Europe or all Europeans equally, and which is, therefore, hard and perhaps dangerous to define in single sentences or even paragraphs, but which is felt and experienced in varying ways and degrees by those whose home is Europe, and which is recognized—whether approvingly or disapprovingly—by many from outside.”²

Western scholars insist that real Europeans carry particular identities from their history, experiences, and religion. Without this particular historical essence, people living in Europe carry ambiguous identities. This is the reason that many people are excluded from the European identity and not all inhabitants of Europe are considered “fully” European.

“Completely external to “European history” is medieval Spain. Although Spain is now defined geographically as part of Europe, Arab Spain from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries is seen as being outside “Europe,” in spite of the numerous intimate connections and exchanges in the Iberian Peninsula during that period between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.”³

The Muslim Other

Europe staunchly believes that there is a civilizational difference between Islam and the West. Despite this fact they expect Muslims to shed their civilizational identity and allow the absolute assimilation of Muslims to Western civilization. Paradoxically, the West denies that Islam has its own essence and at the same time blames Islam for hostility towards all non-Muslims. Islam is considered as the primary “other” to European society. This alleged rivalry towards all non-Muslims and in particular Christians then becomes the basis for the formation of a European identity. The West believes that human beings can be separated from their histories and traditions. This belief makes it possible for Western philosophers to

urge for Europeanization of Muslim immigrants and the Islamic world. This logic is invoked for the assimilation of Muslim immigrants into European civilization.

The most powerful tool in the hands of the West is European capitalism and its strategic interests. The West thinks that the representation of Europe's borders is merely a symbolic representation. They believe European capitalism cannot be confined to the European continent. Fortunately, the industrial revolution enabled Europe to encompass the entire globe and administer it. In this whole process, Islam is being portrayed as the only "other" to the European identity.

European Liberal Democracy and Muslims

The possibilities of representing Muslim minorities in modern European states are decreasing every passing day. The basic ideology of political representation in liberal democracies makes it difficult if not impossible to represent Muslims as Muslims. This ideology propagates that the citizens who constitute a democratic state belong to a class that is defined only by what is common to all its members only. This commonality between individual citizens makes

it possible to separate them from their historical and religious identities. All minorities are divided into groups that have an only numerical value.

Theoretically, it is very easy to argue that historical and religious narratives that constitute identities can be deconstructed or fully destroyed. Practically it is very difficult to challenge such narratives. Europe must respect these historical and religious narratives. Weaker groups like Muslim minorities in Europe should be given more space. They must be able to find institutional representation as a minority in a democratic state where they live.

If the European Identity cannot be expressed in terms of a diverse society, which allows multiple ways for different identities to flourish, it may be termed as the failure of secular democratic ideas. In recent times this brute secularism and Euro-centrism has become the main part of the problem. It is our civic and political duty to reject secular extremism. Muslims across the world must condemn and criticize the extremists who manipulate their religion in the name of fighting the evils of modern secular Europe. We as Muslims must not allow anyone to disrespect our faith at the hands of a few violent secular extremists.

Endnotes

- ¹ Talal Asad, "Muslims and European Identity", *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge NY, 2001)
- ² Michael Wintle, "Cultural Identity in Europe: Shared Experience," in M. Wintle, ed., *Culture and Identity in Europe* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996)
- ³ Talal Asad, "Muslims and European Identity", *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge NY, 2001)