Muslim identity

The European context

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Abstract

Islam is a minority religion in Europe; however, the number of Muslims is rapidly increasing and with this increase comes the issue of Muslim identity and what it means to a 'new look' Europe. Muslims like people in other religious groups come from different nationalities, social backgrounds and economic levels. Yet in countries across Europe, Muslims have established a common community, because of their 'affiliation' to Islam; their religion is their identity. Identity is an issue fundamental to all our lives. Each one of us is a complex collection of loyalties, associations, beliefs and personal perspectives. However, for many, the question of identity may seldom cause personal conflict or trauma as people live within established communities with shared beliefs and perspectives. For others, particularly those who live in fragmented communities or belong to minority or marginalised groups as in the case of the religious minority group discussed here it may be a question that pursues them all their lives. The most commonly accepted way of defining identity within Western society, as an individual within a liberal democracy, is discussed in this paper, followed by a consideration of minorities within those democratic communities and in particular one religious minority, Muslims, in the European context.

Liberal Democracies and Minorities

Most people in the modern world subscribe to the ideal of democracy, where the concept of the rights of the individual is seen as fundamental. Another obvious feature of this world is the nation state defined by boundaries that frequently include people of diverse cultural, religious and tribal identities. The evolution of the nation state shifted loyalties from a tribal cultural focus to that of national. Parekh (1999: 2) explains that the nation state

> "set about dismantling long-established communities and uniting the 'emancipated' individuals on the basis of a collectively accepted and centralised structure of authority."

Gradually, the power of cultural and religious communities was subsumed into that of the nation state with individuals becoming the defining unit within that state and with in many cases communities no longer the dominant source of power. However, no evolutionary process is simple and straightforward and the relationship between the nation state, group and individual identities in different contexts illustrates the varying rates of development and the complexity of the balance.

Though many of us may aspire to live in an individual-focused, democratic, nationally defined society, there are many examples of tensions between the whole and parts where religious and cultural identities remain paramount and take precedence over the national. Why does this tension arise? The answer lies to some extent in Von Herder's detailed description of every individual's elementary need to belong, what Margalit (1990: 443) explains as "familiarity with a culture determines the boundaries of the imaginonaLiberal Democracies of the balased Tc-icriptih whersh4 To.000 o belong,

establishment of the school will be resented and may have repercussions.

Walzer (1992: 100) as a critic of group rights and recognition of these groups maintains that a "sharp divorce of state and ethnicity" is needed, a situation he refers to as the non-discrimination model. This model has been applied in the U.S with reasonable success because of what Walzer refers to as 'New World' pluralism. This involves voluntary movement by immigrant groups knowing that they may have to integrate into the new society. Glazer (1975: 25) agrees that this model may be appropriate in certain contexts such as when the government aims at "integrating disparate groups into a single national culture, based on a common language, shared history, and political institutions." On the other hand, he (ibid:26) proposes the groups rights model if a society operates on the assumption

> "that it is a confederation of groups, that group membership is central and permanent, and that the divisions between groups are such that it is unrealistic or unjust to envisage these groups identities weakening in time to

normative pluralism; there needs to be some set of norms or rules which exist above these cultural elements in order to create a stable society. "For a society to function, the value of unity must ultimately triumph over the value of pluralism." Pluralism should therefore be secondary to primary values such as health, housing and education; it is also about accepting differences and the fact that beliefs may sometimes just be incompatible and that a way around this problem must be sought.

If a society achieves some of the above then it can be said to be on the route to being a multicultural society. As Parekh (1999: 3) discusses, "most contemporary societies are culturally diverse, but only some of them are multicultural or culturally plural." If a society is multicultural, it welcomes and cherishes plurality,

and definitions of these issues including integration. How can we assume around the countries of Europe that everyone will follow the definition of integration laid out by the respective governments, when the majority of governments do not have a clearly constructed framework for implementing their integration policies? Each minority group, in this case Muslims, must be looked at in its own context, thereby ensuring that a way is found to take both the minority and the majority cultures into account. If this is true, can one really define integration as being positive or negative?

Religious Issues and Religious Minorities

Groups are classified as minorities due to different circumstances, be it because of common ethnicity, cultural beliefs, linguistic patterns and goveroi3t9mTosa differe-1.t-1.2096 Ti tmember148Ti s iso7-7(t asf) t as-1.9( )li, -0s Taylmer(1995: 29)4 Tw[cirulturt9

theories regarding the place of religion focused on the liberal ideology of citizens as primarily individuals invested with different kinds of rights, of which the religious right is but one. One such

awareness of different religions needs to be raised ensuring that individuals accept different approaches to how individuals live their lives; creating not a secular society, but one encompassing all religions. S. Abu Sahlieh (2002) argues for the importance of national rather than religious borders and asks if this is not a pivotal question when trying to maintain classic Islamic norms.

The third cliché ties in closely with the second discussed above, but relates directly to the role of the state. Khalidi, along with other scholars, states that Islam is not in a pure platonic form; thereby negating constancy, a fact true of every religion. Islam of one time and place is quite different from the Islam of another time and place. The early Islamic Empire saw a clear differentiation between the spiritual and legal roles of the Caliph as defined by al-Ghazali. Khalidi believes that Islamic scholars need to look at theoretical reinterpretation and social reintegration.

It is also important to distinguish between Islamic principals relating to religious ritual and those concerning secular affairs and society: the first are detailed and precise while the second provide general guidance rather than a fixed framework. According to Ramadan (2004: 145):

> "Muslims need to decide individually and independently using their reason, their freedom and their imagination, what their commitment will be with regards to the social and political levels."

Ramadan and Parekh feel it is normal for groups to wish to 'protect' themselves in the first decades in which they reside in a new country to protect against the loss of their culture through too much contact with outsiders. Both believe that this phenomenon should be acknowledged and accepted as 'normal' when trying to integrate a minority culture/group into a society. (*ibid*: 52) "This is how all the initial steps towards adaptation undergone by all immigrant populations should be understood." Following this 'protection' stage, Ramadan stresses that Islamic theologians need to consider how Muslims can begin to become part of mainstream society while retaining aspects of their cultures or religions viewed as fundamental to their way of life. This protective state, which Ramadan argues changes with the times and context, should be viewed not as positive or negative but as a normal part of the integration process, and assistance and guidance should be provided to Muslims to facilitate movement to the participatory stages of integration (*ibid*: 9):

> "Western Muslims, because they are undergoing the experience of becoming established in new societies, have no choice but to go back to the beginning and study their points of reference in order to delineate and distinguish what, in their religion, is unchangeable orb0w Tw[b)anw.1(ormaof)]subje to eable integlooksp

positive law enforced in their country of residence in the name of the tacit moral agreement that already supports their very

Distance continues to grow and has led to severe problems in recent times particularly in the Netherlands, France and Denmark as explained by Bawer (2003):

> "The distance between mainstream society and the Muslim subculture can be especially striking in the Netherlands, whose relatively small, ethnically homogeneous native populations had, until recent decades, little or no experience with large-scale immigration from outside Europe."

De Volkskrant (2005), editor of the Financial Times in the Netherlands, claims that even though the Netherlands is viewed as the 'most liberal' society on earth,

> "in the eyes of most Dutch people, integration means adapting to a humanistic tradition, to the separation between church and state, and distancing oneself from the norms and values of one's motherland."

This attitude is widespread across European societies and maintained through the laissez-faire attitudes of the governments. Bawer (2003:

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