

# Islam in the West or Western Islam? The Disconnect of Religion and Culture<sup>1</sup>

*Olivier Roy*

The definitive presence of a huge Muslim population in Europe will, of course, have long-term consequences. There is, nevertheless, some debate about the figures of the Muslim population, partly due to imprecise data, partly due to the difficulty of knowing who qualifies as a Muslim. Is one defined as a Muslim strictly because of one's choice to belong to that religious community, or is one a Muslim by ethnic background? Beyond the demographic aspect, the fact that Islam is taking hold in Europe seems to put into question European identity. It is clear that the rejection of Turkey's European Union candidature by European public opinion is largely linked to the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country. Furthermore, the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh seems to have played a role in the Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in May 2005. What does the rise of Islam in Europe entail in terms of shared culture and values? Should we speak of "Islam in the West" as if Islam were the bridgehead of a different culture area, or of "Western Islam" as if a European Islam should necessarily differ from its Middle Eastern or Asian versions?

Since the late 1970s, when it became clear that the bulk of incoming immigrants would stay in Europe, two models have shaped Western European countries' immigration policies. The first model is called "multiculturalism" and is dominant in Northern Europe; the second one is "assimilationism" and has been advocated by a broad spectrum of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the conference "Religion, Secularism, and the End of the West," held by the Center on Religion and Democracy and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture in Laxenburg/Vienna, Austria, on June 3, 2005.

Olivier Roy is Research Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and Lecturer at both the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Institut d'Études Politiques in Paris. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Failure of Political Islam* (1996), *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (2000), and *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah* (2004).

political forces in France. This last model—an exception in a generally multiculturalist Europe—possesses new appeal for Northern European countries (Belgium, Holland, and Denmark). Both models presuppose what is perceived as a national and/or Western identity, which, for the multiculturalist approach, should coexist with other cultures. However, the assimilationist perspective assumes that the “Western” model is universal and could integrate people from various cultural backgrounds on the condition that they give up former identities.

*Contemporary fundamentalism, therefore, entails a disconnect of religious markers from cultural content.*

At the end of the 1990s, however, both models were widely seen as having failed, which led to an unprecedented convergence between the different European countries. Countries that did not consider themselves immigration societies (Italy and Spain) realized recently that, in fact, they have actually acquired a permanent Muslim population—and this is a realization that

Eastern European countries will soon be having. This convergence demands a European approach to the question of what Islam in Europe means. The same issue is, it should be noted, addressed by some Islamic institutions in Europe (The European Council of Fatwa, based in London, for instance).

The model of multiculturalism failed not because of the “multi” but because of the “culturalism.” The underlying idea was that a religion is embedded into a culture (or that any culture is based on a religion). Religious believers form a community with its own customs, social fabric, diet, and so on, and community leaders who maintain some sort of social control on the community. To share a faith means to share a common culture. Such self-regulation through community leaders is portrayed in an old story from Holland, in which the Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal around 1600 were granted asylum and offered hospitality, but asked to regulate their own community themselves.

The French assimilationist model failed because it initially ignored the religious dimension of immigrants’ identities, or more exactly, because it presupposed that this dimension would fade away during the process of integration. The underlying policy was to integrate the Muslims the way the Jews had been integrated in the wake of the French Revolution: to grant them “nothing as a community (nation), everything as individual citizens.” But the rise of different forms of Islamic religious revival among integrated immigrants pushed the government to acknowledge the existence of a (supposedly) purely religious community (hence the creation by the state of a religious body, the French Council of Muslim Faith, in 2002, which is in itself a break from the Republican secular policy of *laïcité*).

It is clear that the way the different European countries have defined their relations with immigrants is deeply rooted in their own history and political culture. But national identities are in crisis at two levels: from above, due to European integration (which

has nothing to do with Islam), and from below, due to the crisis of the “social bind” in destitute neighborhoods (in France) or big city centers (in Holland), and the inability of the school system to cope with these areas of social exclusion. Clearly, the focus on Islam is, wrongly or rightly, a focus on national and/or European identity.

In fact, both immigration models have failed because they have been unable to acknowledge and deal with what is at the root of the present forms of religious revivalism: the disconnect between religion and culture. Religious fundamentalism among Muslims in the West is not a consequence of the importation of a given original culture into the West, but of the deculturation of Islam. Pristine cultures like Islam are in crisis, as immigration changes the relation between migrants and the original culture. Second and third generations tend to prefer the language of the guest country over that of their parents’ home country, and they tend to speak better French than Arabic (when they speak Arabic at all), English than Urdu, and even, but far more slowly, German than Turkish. Youth tend to adopt Western urban youth sub-culture (in terms of dress, slang, music, etc.). Fast food is more popular than traditional cuisine. Moreover, fundamentalism is itself a tool of deculturation. The Saudi Wahhabis reject anything close to a “traditional” culture; they banned music, dance, novels, and non-religious poetry. The Taliban in Afghanistan did not fight against Western influence but against the traditional Afghan culture (banning music, kite-flying, singing birds, etc.). Such a rejection of the very concept of culture appeals to a youth who feels often culturally alienated, even if socially well-integrated. Van Gogh’s killer in Holland spoke better Dutch than Arabic and was not reacting to the Middle Eastern conflict or to Muslim culture. He became outraged at what he saw as blasphemy against Islam in a purely Western context.

Contemporary fundamentalism, therefore, entails a disconnect of religious markers from cultural content. For instance, “*hallal*” does not refer only to a traditional cuisine but describes any cuisine; hence, the flourishing of *hallal* fast-food restaurants among born-again Muslims in the West, but few Moroccan or Turkish traditional restaurants. This disconnect means that the issue is not a clash of cultures between West and East but the recasting of faith into what is seen as a “pure” religion based on isolated religious markers. The issue for European societies is, then, how to deal with such a surge of religious identities at a time when secularization is seen as a prerequisite for democracy and modernity.

It is an often expressed idea that the Westernization of Islam should mean the reformation of Islam. A superficial understanding of Max Weber, who has often been misread, leads to the conclusion that the modernity of a religion has to do with its theological dogma. Because it supposedly does not differentiate between religion and politics, Islam is deemed incompatible with secularization and democracy, as long as it does not undergo a deep theological reform. Such a reasoning ignores the fact that Roman Catholicism never underwent a deep theological reformation (because it would have meant the triumph of Protestantism) but, nevertheless, has been able to adapt reluctantly to modernism. Of course, there are “liberal” Muslim theologians who advocate

some sort of reformation. But, for me, this is not a prerequisite for Westernization. In fact, Westernization is already at work, specifically in the more fundamentalist forms of religious expression, for two reasons. First, fundamentalism entails a clear delinking of religion and culture. And second, the new forms of religiosity are “transversal,” which is common to Islam and Christianity. What is at stake is not religion (a set of dogma and rituals), but religiosity (the relationship between a believer and religion). Even if the dogmas differ, we find common forms of religiosity that explain the religious nomadism of our time (people going from religion to religion while claiming to look for the same thing).

The present forms of religiosity are based on the same patterns. There is a stress on the individual, coupled with the crisis of religious institutions. Immediate access to the “truth” is promised through faith, at the expense of studies. A contempt of history, tradition, philosophy, and literature develops, as favor for a direct, personal, emotional form of religious feeling takes precedence. And the religious community is defined not as an already existing body (church or *ummah*), but as a reconstructed community of the “chosen” by individuals. The “community” lives both in and apart from the existing society.

The space of the *ummah* is no longer a territorial one, implying a political leadership, with a nation-state and borders. In fact, most of the neo-fundamentalist movements, including the most radical ones, stopped discussing the “*dar ul islam*” (abode of Islam) in territorial terms. They consider the *ummah* to be everywhere Muslims are to be found. An interesting case is that of Hizb-ul-Tahrir, a radical (although not terrorist) movement now based in London, which advocates the revival of the Islamic Caliphate but simply skips the issue of its territorial basis: the Caliphate could be restored in a very short time if every Muslim decides that it exists and pledges loyalty to it. Thus, one can live both as a member of a specific minority group while also part of a universal community.

This dialectic of universalism/minority is interesting because it is to be found both in Islam and Christianity. Although the great majority of Americans claim to be practicing Christians, every church speaks about living as a minority in a decadent society (as illustrated by the novel *Left Behind*, in which the “saved” are a minority).<sup>2</sup> Even the Catholic Church acknowledges representing a minority in Europe and advocates closing ranks in difficult times. As much as religion tends to be disembedded from cultures, churches and congregations tend to be disembedded from mainstream society (a process clearly at work in Spain and Italy, where, until recently, Catholicism was seen as being at the core of the national culture).

---

<sup>2</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 1995).

The new dilemma for many who are born again is not how to rebuild the society on Christian or Islamic principles, but how to live integrally with that society according to one's true religious tenets. "Integralism" in this sense tends to replace "fundamentalism," and religious revivalism does not challenge the existing political or social order. The brand of fundamentalism that is thriving among many second-generation Muslim immigrants in the West is a paradoxical consequence of their own Westernization, which means first deculturation and then the recasting of Islam as a "mere" religion. Yet the same phenomena of deculturation and recasting could take different forms, such as "liberal," "mystical," or "conservative ethical" Islam.

"Liberal Islam" means delinking the religious meaning of the *Koran* and the *Sunnah* from its socio-cultural and historical context. Historically, it could be said that Islam was a progression in terms of women's conditions, compared to the previous period (*jabiliyya* or "ignorance"), but that it nevertheless had to take into account the customs of the time (for example, allowing polygamy without recommending it). If one comes back to the true spirit of the text, then, men and women should be considered equal. The same argument is used about the prohibition of alcohol: alcohol was banned because people were unable to drink moderately and thus became drunk at prayer time, but if one can drink without becoming drunk, then alcohol is permitted. Whatever the religious validity of such assertions, they clearly contribute to making Islam Western-compatible. It should be noted, however, that such a view is not dominant by definition among those who are born again and represents more the "lazy" discourse of secular or seldom-practicing Muslims when they are asked to explain their behavior.

*...many Muslims in the West are recasting their religious norms in terms of Western-compatible values, but not necessarily on the liberal side.*

Mystical Islam is linked with the burgeoning of Sufi orders. These brotherhoods, whether traditional or reconstructed, are wide open to converts, once again blurring the divide between West and East. Islamic Sufism fits here with the spread of New Age religious communities and cults in the West.

Conservative ethical Islam is probably the dominant trend among practicing Muslims, who could be compared to Orthodox Jews. The basic norms are taken into account, especially the diet norms: eating *halal* and fasting during Ramadan, for instance.<sup>3</sup> But beside this normative dimension, norms tend to be recast into values on the model of conservative Christianity. For example, Holland. When Pym Fortuyn entered into politics, it was to protest the declarations of a Dutch-speaking Moroccan Imam who called homosexuals "sick people" and refused to grant them any rights as a minority

<sup>3</sup> The fast of Ramadan is, according to polls, the most respected religious norm among French Muslims, even before daily prayer.

group. Fortuyn, however, was not acting in the name of traditional Western values but in defense of the “sexual liberation” movement of the 1960s, which is largely seen by many conservative Christians as the collapse of a society based on values and principles. Interestingly enough, many Muslims in the West are recasting their religious norms in terms of Western-compatible values, but not necessarily on the liberal side. They tend, for instance, to support the anti-abortion campaign, while abortion has never been a central issue in Muslim societies (it is usually condemned, but the ban on abortion has never really been enforced).

The debate in the West is not between Islamic and Western values, but within the West: What are Western values? Where is the divide between human freedom and nature (or God)? In fact, Islam is the mirror in which Europe is looking at its own identity, but it does not offer a new culture or new values. It expresses itself inside the present debate on religious revivalism and secularism—but as part of the debate, not its cause.