



## MUSLIMS PLURALIZE THE WEST, RESIST ASSIMILATION

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On November 20, 2003, while President George W. Bush was visiting Britain, two Turkish militants bombed the British consulate and a British bank in Istanbul, killing 27 people. Bush's state visit had been scheduled months earlier to celebrate what had been expected, if a bit presumptuously, to be an unmixed victory in the Anglo-U.S. war in Iraq. The bombings were the Turks' revenge against the invasion of that Muslim country, said a statement issued on the bombers' behalf.

The Turkish militants were Muslims, and a British government minister demanded that his Muslim countrymen, three-fourths of them of South Asian origins, "make a choice." They should choose, said Denis MacShane, whether to adopt British values of "democracy and rule of law . . . or the way of the terrorists."<sup>1</sup> Muslim leaders in Britain condemned his comment while some Britons defended him. Clare Short, who had resigned from Prime Minister Tony Blair's Cabinet to protest the Iraq war, jumped into the fray. She did not question MacShane's insinuation about a British Muslim connection to Turkish terrorism but blamed the "messianic, right-wing" Blair for provoking the

attacks on British targets by invading a Muslim country.<sup>2</sup>

The argument indicates a sea change in British perception of Muslims. In the early 1970s, when I lived in Britain, Muslim immigrants from South Asia and elsewhere had frequent run-ins with anti-immigrant gangs. And right-wing activists, led by Enoch Powell, a jingoistic member of Parliament, would demand that the "Pakis" be shipped "back home."

"Pakis" is a pejorative term for Pakistanis, who made up nearly a third of the Muslim population in Britain. But because they were – and remain – in the vanguard of the Muslim anti-racist struggle, their national label was used to identify Muslim activists from everywhere. You seldom heard Pakistanis, Bangladeshis or Turks referred to as "Muslims." They all were "Pakis."

Today British Muslims, regardless of national origin, are called Muslims. Most Europeans as well as North Americans understand that Muslims across ethnic and national lines belong to a global religious fraternity, share some common values and espouse some common causes. Some Westerners assume, incorrectly, that they may also support criminal or antisocial acts



committed by Muslims.

Significant, too, was another assumption reflected in the brouhaha over the Istanbul bombing. Neither MacShane nor any other Briton demanded that any British Muslims be sent “back home.” Britons accept Muslims as part of their society, undesirable as some may consider them to be. So do other Westerners. Peter Mandaville, a writer on Islam in Europe, says, “Islam has well and truly found a place for itself within the social fabric of contemporary European society. No longer perceived solely as an ‘immigrant’ religion, Islam is claiming the right not only to exist but also to flourish within the boundaries of the European Union.”<sup>3</sup> It is flourishing in North America as well.

How do Muslims of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds operate as a global fraternity and as local and regional communities? How are they coping in their new sociocultural environment in the West? Are they going to assimilate into Western societies? What do they bring to Western civilization?

To a large degree, Muslim communal life in the West devolves from their perception of “selfhood” as members of the global Muslim community, the *umma*. (Other factors that contribute to their self-perception include their ties to their faith, workplace, neighbors, state and, for the immigrant generation, native cultures.) Some scholars have described the *umma* as an “imagined community” similar to a nation.<sup>4</sup> Of course, a nation has or aspires to have a sovereign state with coercive authority; the *umma* does not.

The *umma* was born in the Arabian town of Yathrib in the 620s as an interfaith defense alliance among Muslims, Christians and Jews to protect that town against

invaders from Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad and his followers had migrated to Yathrib, renamed Medina, to avoid persecution in their native town of Mecca. Eventually the *umma* evolved as a Muslim community comprising a variety of Meccan and Medinese tribal elements and remained ethnically pluralist. Since 656, when a bloody rebellion broke out against the third Islamic caliph, Uthman, the *umma* has been fractured over theology, ethnicity, political power and statehood.

The *umma* endures, however, as a global socioreligious fraternity without a normative structure. It is inherently pluralist because of the Quranic precept about religious tolerance and Muslims’ intercourse with myriad cultures around the world. Yet the concept evokes a “we” feeling among Muslims that is manifested through local, regional and global formations: a neighborhood Muslim club in Los Angeles, the Jamaat-i-Islami political parties in South Asia, the 56-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference and so on.

*Umma* solidarity can be seen in action when a picnic is arranged by my mosque in Laurel, Maryland; when a campaign is organized by the German *Milli Gorus* organization to introduce Islamic courses in German public schools; or when protests erupt against an attack on Muslims or Islam, as in March 2003, in Cairo, Amman, Islamabad, Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta against the U.S.-led war in Iraq. The *umma* spirit, too, may appear in a momentary encounter between Muslims who are perfect strangers.

#### UMMA IN A CAB

In June 1987, my friend Muhammad Khalid Masud, a Pakistani Muslim scholar, was traveling to Tangier, Morocco, to



participate in a conference on Islam. In London he met James Piscatori, an American scholar on Islam (now teaching at Oxford University), who had also been invited to the conference, and from there the two traveled together. During the flight, Piscatori argued that the umma concept is only a Muslim aspiration. In the real world, he said, Muslims have all along been fighting and killing one another. Masud replied that underneath their feuds Muslims feel the pull of their umma bond.

At airports around the world, Third World passengers' travel documents and luggage are checked more carefully than those of Westerners. Tangier airport was no exception. Piscatori, carrying his American passport, was allowed to breeze through the passport and customs gates. Masud, with his Pakistani passport, had to spend a long time answering questions and having his luggage examined. That Morocco is a Muslim country and the airport staff almost entirely Muslim did not help him.

When Masud emerged from the customs gate, he complained to the waiting Piscatori that the airport people had given him "a hard time."

"Well," the American demanded triumphantly, "where was your umma?"

They hired a taxicab to go to their hotel. The cabbie, a Muslim, asked them in broken English about their homeland, religion, etc., and was told that Masud was a Pakistani Muslim and Piscatori an American Christian. The man did not say another word to Piscatori and effusively welcomed Masud to Tangier, addressed him as "brother," and peppered him with a barrage of questions. Had Masud been to Morocco before? What had brought him to Tangier? How long would he stay? Was Benazir Bhutto, then Pakistani's prime

minister, a good leader? He went on and on. Masud turned to his American friend, and pointing to the driver, declared: "Here's my umma."<sup>5</sup> The bond, ruptured at political levels, endures on the social plane.

Former U.S. Senator Charles McC. Mathias Jr. (R-Md.) once told me that Americans who are viscerally critical of "everything American" appreciate America better when they travel abroad. The same can be said of Muslims and the umma. Muslims in Muslim societies are generally indifferent to their umma solidarity. Their consciousness about it revives when they travel or live abroad or face challenges from non-Muslim adversaries or social environment.

Hence Diaspora Muslims in North America and Western Europe, numbering about 20 million, have a heightened sense of their umma ties. Western Muslim communities are made up mostly of immigrants and their descendants. The immigrants are alienated from their neighborhood, ethnic and national communities and often face an identity crisis. In Pakistan, a Muslim identifies with his ethnic community (Yusufzai, Muhajir), region (Sindh, Punjab) or nationality (Pakistan). In Chicago or London, he is removed from those sources of identification. Some Chicagoans or Londoners may still identify him as a Pakistani, but in his everyday life what does that mean to him? The villages, rivers, meadows, music and politics that make up Pakistan are no longer with him. Pakistan is even less relevant to his British- or U.S.-born children, who may have few links to that country.

Islam is a more useful locus of identity for Muslim immigrants because it carries a profound sense of meaning for them. Religion, says Clifford Geertz, can "trans-



port [a person] into another mode of existence.<sup>76</sup> Islamic beliefs, practice, festivals and other symbols enable the Muslim immigrant to revisit his old self and environment in a most intimate sense. Islam also helps him cope with his new environment because it serves as a template for “thinking and feeling about reality.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, the institution of umma enables the uprooted and isolated Muslims in the diaspora to build meaningful social, political and matrimonial relationships across ethnic boundaries. Interethnic Muslim marriages are picking up rather slowly, yet very rarely would a Muslim marry a non-Muslim even from his or her own ethnic group.

The son of a Palestinian Muslim immigrant to the United States, for example, would marry the daughter of a Lebanese or Kuwaiti Muslim, but very rarely the daughter of a Palestinian Christian. In Britain, according to sociologist Muhammad Anwar, only 3 percent of Muslims are married to non-Muslims.<sup>8</sup> A survey in Denmark found that only 5 percent of Muslim youths would be willing to marry non-Muslims.<sup>9</sup> And one in Detroit showed that only 4 percent of Muslims in that city were married to non-Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

More and more, second- and third-generation Western Muslims are discarding their forebears’ ethnic symbols (language, dress, food, customs) and forming interethnic Muslim communities. “While previous generations accepted the primacy of ethnic and national ties in the practice of their religion,” writes a researcher, “Muslims in Europe today often feel that these networks conflict with the universal bond of Islam. . . . Islamic ties, for these young Muslims, refer exclusively to the concept of umma, or community of believers.”<sup>11</sup>

## INTEGRATION VS. ASSIMILATION

The big question is whether these Muslims – immigrants and their descendants – are any different from other large waves of immigrants to Western countries who went through a similar process of acculturation, dropping ethnic characteristics and gathering themselves into religious categories. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholics from Poland, Italy, Spain and Ireland and Ashkenazi Jews from Germany, Poland and Russia migrated in large numbers to Western Europe and North America. Most of those immigrants lived in their ethnoreligious cocoons. Polish Catholics would mostly socialize with Polish Catholics, Italian Catholics with Italian Catholics, Polish Jews with Polish Jews, and so on. By the second and third generations, the ethnic barriers among each group would give way, and the offspring of immigrants would regroup as religious categories, as shown in the following case study.

In the United States a large new wave of European immigration began in the early 1870s and stopped by the 1920s. By then, the 1870s immigrants had mostly retired and their grandchildren had come of age. Sociologist Will Herberg cited a landmark survey showing that second- and third-generation Americans of European descent had shed their forebears’ ethnic symbols and were outwardly like all other Americans. Yet they felt an “acute” need for “belonging and self-identification.” And they were meeting that need by holding on to their parents’ and grandparents’ religions.

“Religious association now became the primary context of self-identification and social location for the third generation, as well as for the bulk of the second generation of America’s immigrants, and that

meant, by and large, for the American people.” Gradually, American society was evolving into three “melting pots” of Protestants, Catholics and Jews.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, the continuation of the stream of immigration is one reason religiosity in America has not declined to the European level.

Today the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants appear to be coming together as a fourth “melting pot” in not just the United States but Western Europe as well. As early as the 1980s, Dutch sociologist Jacques Waardenburg saw “Islam . . . transcend[ing] the present ethnic diversity” in his country and emerging as a faith-based community.<sup>13</sup> Others have noted the gradual evolution of a “European Islam.”<sup>14</sup> Yet while Protestants, Catholics and Ashkenazi Jews are all of European origins, Muslims came from all over the globe and are ethnically and culturally far more pluralist than any other religious community in the West. Cultural pluralism has become a hallmark of Western Islam, a bewildering variety of racial and ethnic groups held together by the umma bond.

Partly because of this, the Muslim “melting pot” differs from the Catholic and Jewish ones. For over time, the offspring of European Catholic and Jewish immigrants have largely assimilated into host-country mainstreams. Muslims are unlikely to do so. Ethnoreligious dissonance apart, a variety of other factors that will presently be discussed thwart their assimilation into the Western Judeo-Christian social milieu. Instead, they are helping to pluralize some Western societies for the first time since the Middle Ages and are reinforcing the pluralist texture in others.

Catholic and Jewish assimilation into host societies occurred in two stages. The

first stage, as noted, consisted in their shedding ethnic identities and evolving as religious communities. In the second stage, which for many Jews is still in progress, they regrouped again into secular national mainstreams.

In the United States in 1980, four out of 10 marriages of Americans of European ancestry occurred across ethnic or religious boundaries. Today intermarriages are more common among them, and the three “melting pots” of Protestants, Catholics and Jews have themselves all but melted. Americans of European descent are fast assimilating into a new ethnic category that has been termed “European Americans.”<sup>15</sup> Descendants of immigrants from one European country to another have assimilated even more thoroughly. In the United States, you still hear some people describe themselves as Irish Americans or Russian Jews. You do not hear many Europeans identifying themselves as Belgian French, Portuguese Italians or Italian British.

In any case, Muslims are stopping at the second stage of cultural transmutation. Instead of assimilating, they are “integrating” into host societies. Before looking into the factors that militate against Muslim assimilation, a word about assimilation and integration. Assimilation means the cultural and structural merger of ethnic or religious categories. In the United States, for example, when we see Reformed Jews and Protestants working, socializing, dining and politicking together, we say they have merged or coalesced culturally. But if we see them also intermarrying in large numbers so as to blur their ethnic and religious identities, we would say they have also blended structurally. In other words, they have assimilated.

But two ethnic or religious groups may



do some things together and other things separately. American Sephardic Jews may be working with Protestants in the Democratic Party, factories and offices and socializing in neighborhood clubs, but they may eat different meals, dress differently, observe different holidays, celebrate different festivals and, more important, have a strong disinclination toward marrying non-Jews. In that case, Sephardic Jews are mixing with Protestants culturally but not blending with them structurally. The two groups have integrated but did not assimilate. Pluralism characterizes the relationships between groups that are integrated well without assimilating. In this example, the Sephardic Jews have a pluralistic relationship with the Protestants.

Muslims are steadily integrating into Western societies despite the “Islamophobia” of many nativist Westerners and the xenophobia of many orthodox Muslims. In most of the West, Muslims interact with Christians and Jews on the job and in civil-society groups, interfaith organizations and political campaigns. But most Muslims make friends and socialize regularly with fellow Muslims. They would not go out very often on a picnic with non-Muslims. One would see few Muslims at a Halloween party, a Macy’s parade or a Bastille Day celebration, let alone at a non-Muslim home for dinner.

#### FAITH OF A DIFFERENT KIND

One wonders if this pattern of Muslim relationships will hold or lead eventually to assimilation. After all, the assimilation of the children of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from one Western country to another followed their integration into host societies. Initially, Catholic and Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants were quite religious, at

least culturally, as they migrated to more industrialized and cosmopolitan social environments. In their host countries they or their children began to secularize from a two-pronged exposure to modernity. Their interaction with coworkers and neighbors from disparate cultural backgrounds gradually eroded their sense of certainty about their inherited religious values. Second, in their industrial workplaces technology helped them routinely rationalize the outcome of human actions, diminishing their reliance on supernatural intervention in life. Once secularized, they would have fewer qualms about marrying and assimilating into other religious groups of European origins.

Incidentally, Western-born Muslims are also secularizing rather fast,<sup>16</sup> and many scholars observing this trend think that a generation or two down the road, they will inevitably assimilate into the Western national mainstreams. Muslims are “not very different” from other immigrants, said French Islamic scholar Mohammed Arkoun. They would assimilate into the mainstream as all others have.<sup>17</sup> His view is shared by Lucette Valensi, another French scholar of Islam.<sup>18</sup> I have heard other European and American Islamic scholars echo their assessment.

I disagree with them. I see Muslims as different in many ways from Western faith groups. Even though modernity is secularizing Muslims, it is not creating the same worldview and attitudes among them as it has among Western Christians and Jews. The Western definition of secularity, meaning in part the separation of the private and public spheres, does not generally apply to Muslims. Islam does not delineate a secular sphere from a religious one and is not just a faith but an umma and



a civilization as well. Secularity for a Muslim would mean just indifference to religious praxis. A Muslim might not pray or fast and might even become an agnostic, but he might still support Islamic social norms and campaign for *jihad* against the U.S. occupation of Iraq or the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Secularization is not causing his “fusion of horizons” – to use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s apt expression – with a Judeo-Christian social milieu.

Ernest Gellner obviously had the Western concept of secularism in mind when he wrote: “Islam is unique among world religions in being, so far, clearly incompatible with the widely held secularization thesis, which maintains that the social and psychic hold of religion diminishes with industrialism.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, in Western societies, race remains an enduring barrier to non-white groups’ assimilation into the white mainstream. Racial tensions have in fact increased in post-Cold War Europe. Even in the United States, civil-rights laws and citizen activism for a half-century have failed to draw African Americans or Native Americans into the white mainstream, even though most of these minorities share its faiths.

A 1990 study showed only 0.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites in the United States were married to blacks. Neither were blacks much more interested in racial mixing: only 2 percent of them had non-black spouses.<sup>20</sup> In fact “black pride” has replaced the African American aspiration for assimilation with white America. One writer says the 1995 Million Man’s March to Washington, which proclaimed an exclusive African American social agenda, “was the symbolic end of [the] age” of the assimilationist campaign marked by the

1963 march to Washington led by Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>21</sup>

Western Muslims belong to non-Western racial stocks, besides practicing a non-Western faith. They are harder to assimilate into white Judeo-Christian populations than were white European immigrants of the same religious backgrounds. In other words, Muslims’ predilection to nurture their own cultural niche suits Western societies’ lingering race consciousness. “There is little interest on either side,” notes one commentator on Muslim relations with native Westerners, “in having [Muslims] assimilate.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, assimilation into Western societies has never been an appealing idea to most Muslims. Prior to the onset of European modernization, Islam was the font of scientific inquiry, scholarship and material progress. Muslim intellectuals used to scorn Europeans as a backward lot who, according to one, were known for “ignorance and apathy, lack of discernment and stupidity.”<sup>23</sup> Many contemporary Muslims, intellectuals and lay people, view the Muslim world’s economic backwardness and military impotence as temporary, and the current Islamic resurgence as the precursor to the revival of Islamic civilization.

Then there is the *umma* factor and the communications revolution, which also are helping shore up the Western Islamic space against assimilationist pressure. One reason the children of Catholic and Jewish immigrants assimilated into Western national mainstreams was the absence of a cultural wellspring to forestall the erosion of their distinctive cultural life. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Irish Catholics migrated to New England, they were cut off from their native land and cultural life almost permanently. The only cultural



liaison they could have with Ireland was through occasional letters from relatives and perhaps a visit or two with them in their entire lives.

Muslim cultural life in the West today is constantly feeding on adrenaline from the global umma received through immigration, travel, television, newspapers, the Internet, telephone, fax, cassettes and other modern means of communication. The increasing integration of the Islamic heartland and its Western Diaspora effectively thwarts the assimilationist pull of host societies.

### REASONING BACKWARD

Furthermore, Western societies no longer demand the assimilation of minorities that they used to. Today Westerners value, or tolerate, cultural diversity. Some societies such as Canada, the United States, Britain and the Netherlands proclaim themselves to be “multicultural,” in that they treat each culture, at least officially, as equal and facilitate the fostering of minority cultures. The problem with this pluralist approach is that it tends to promote ethnic narcissism and discourage individual initiative and responsibility, which is embedded in Islamic pluralism. And it would impede the social integration necessary for social stability. In any case, tolerance for discrepant cultures has increased dramatically in the West, including Western Europe, which used to be a Judeo-Christian cultural monochrome.

Some Western societies concede minorities a range of opportunities to foster their cultures while discriminating against them in other ways. France and Germany are among the countries where minorities suffer relatively greater legal and social disabilities. Even in these countries there is little overt pressure for assimilation. In

general, Western societies are on an irreversible course of pluralization, and the most obvious force behind it is the growth of non-Western minorities, especially the Muslims, the fastest growing of all.

The Muslim birthrate in Europe is three times higher than the European average, and Muslim immigration continues. A Brookings Institution researcher says the EU Muslim population, now 15 million, will double in 12 years.<sup>24</sup> And, incredible as it seems, a Dutch scholar estimates that one day “Muslims are expected to outnumber non-Muslims in Europe.”<sup>25</sup> Whatever the actual rate of their growth, Muslims are inexorably pluralizing Western Europe. And the 5-7 million North American Muslims are reinforcing the more advanced pluralist social texture of this continent.

But a deeper cause of the increasing pluralization of Western societies has been the decline of Eurocentrism. Proponents of this thesis say that modern European (or Western) civilization is due to the white man’s genetic (or cultural, as it is euphemistically termed these days) superiority, and that modernity is universally beneficial. Hence non-Westerners need to shun their “inferior” values and lifestyles. For a long time, criticism of the doctrine was confined mainly to intellectuals and ideologues. Modernity had led to the industrialization of the West, and Westerners were content with the material comforts it provided. Since the 1970s, common people in the West have increasingly been affected by industrialism’s pernicious effects: environmental pollution, anomie, family breakdown, crime, drug abuse, growing social inequity and so forth. More and more intellectuals and activists are arguing that the pursuit of fulfillment through exclusive reliance on scientific knowledge and





material progress may have backfired. George F. McLean writes,

At the beginning of the twentieth century, humanity had felt itself poised for the final push to create, by the power of science, a utopia not only by subduing and harnessing the physical powers of nature, but by genetic human engineering and social manipulation. Looking back from the present vantage point we find that the history of this century has proven to be quite different from these utopian goals. It has been marked by poverty that cannot be erased and exploitation ever more broadspread, two World Wars, pogroms and holocausts, genocide and “ethnic cleansing,” emerging intolerance, family collapse and anomie.<sup>26</sup>

Others with more charitable views of modernity discount the claim that it is a uniquely Western phenomenon for which Western values need to be blindly emulated by Muslims or other non-Westerners. How could Eastern societies that remained steeped in communal (as different from individualist) values and lifestyles such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore modernize so impressively? Modernity no longer seems to many to be a uniquely Western characteristic.

David Landes attributes a large part of the West European “economic revolution” to the availability of large draft horses, an early start with agriculture and a half-millennium of relative peace in Western Europe beginning in the eleventh century. Europeans could make full use of these opportunities, he says, because individual initiative had been fostered by, among other things, the fragmentation of their political units by northern European invaders in

earlier centuries.<sup>27</sup> The great European historian Henri Pirenne adds that the transformation of rural, inward-looking Europeans into an enterprising, forward-looking people was precipitated by the rise of Islam: The Muslims provoked Europe into a millennial contest by conquering the Christian Levant, cutting off Europeans’ trade routes and challenging them militarily on their own turf. “[W]ithout Mahomet,” he says, “Charlemagne would have been inconceivable.”<sup>28</sup>

The West’s economic and political ascendancy has resulted from a variety of historical and geographical factors, but the Eurocentrists have chosen to “reason backward” to claim the white man’s innate superiority to be the cause of the phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the claim of “European exceptionalism” is largely a colonialist concept. Few Europeans thought of themselves as exceptional until they began ruling over other peoples by dint of superior military machines and organization. In attaining their knowledge base and military prowess, says Hugh Trevor-Roper, Europeans drew heavily on Islamic civilization. “[M]odern European civilization,” adds the historian, “is not wholly original; nor did it ever, till the eighteenth century, aspire to be original.”<sup>30</sup>

### A HYBRID BREED

Ultimately, it is modernity’s inner contradiction that is defusing the West’s assimilationist pull and reinforcing pluralism in Western societies. The imperative of material progress and self-improvement spurred modern industrial economies into continuous expansion, which has ushered in globalization and the creation of the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement. But globalization and



transnational political and economic partnerships have been corroding the sovereignty of Western nation-states and the integrity of Western national cultures into which “inferior” cultures were once expected to assimilate. Western citizens’ increasing involvement in transnational economic, social and cultural pursuits is also strengthening pluralist trends. Pluralism will advance further in Europe because of the recent incorporation of Orthodox Slavic and other east European peoples into the EU and in the United States from the rapid growth of the Hispanic population.

The growth of pluralism has greatly facilitated the building of a Muslim socio-cultural niche in the West. In the United States, religion never really left the public square and is now being patronized indirectly by the Bush administration through its “faith-based” programs. In France, where secularism has become “an alternative faith,”<sup>31</sup> government curbs on the use of religious symbols in schools are stimulating religious fervor among Muslims, Catholics and Jews. It all bolsters Western Muslims’ resolve to build their distinctive religiocultural space.

That space is taking on unique characteristics as it straddles both Islamic and Western cultures making the new generations of Western Muslims a unique breed. The Western-born make up about 50 percent of the Western Muslim population who are loath to assimilate into Western societies and yet are alien to many cultural norms and values of the Muslim world. Many shun traditional Muslim symbols such as the dress code, etiquette, relations between the sexes and so on. Most do not speak Arabic, Urdu, Turkish or other Muslim-world languages. Most, too, appreciate Western democratic institutions,

individual freedom and scientific inquiry. They do not identify with any single “spatially bounded, culturally separate” social or political community, and are a hybrid group, “comfortable with fluid and plural identities.”<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, they remain, as mentioned, deeply conscious of their Islamic selfhood, being part of the Islamic civilization and umma, and they share the basic Islamic *Weltanschauung*. Clifford Geertz, who encountered this “concept of selfhood” among Moroccans, traced it to “the more private and settled areas of life,” where it has “a deep and permanent resonance.”<sup>33</sup> Different sets of values instill this self-perception among different social categories. Among Muslims, especially those in the diaspora, it is inculcated by their umma, faith and praxis. And it is being deepened by a unique kind of global Islamic resurgence.

Unlike earlier Muslim movements led by towering statesmen and elaborate organizations for political independence or religious reforms, the current ferment is fueled mainly by individuals and local groups for self-improvement as much as social renewal. During my frequent trips through the Muslim world, I ran into many young Muslims with secular education who were studying the Quran and prophetic traditions on their own. Very few did so in the 1960s, when I was attending college in what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This past July, I met members of a “Muslim Club” in Dhaka who were raising funds to help put poor children through school. In Faisalabad, Pakistan, Altaf Hussein and his friends are campaigning for the enrollment of Muslim girls in school, ignoring orthodox Islamic scholars’ ruling against female education. In



Bursa, Turkey, my former translator Mehmet Ertan is working with a group of volunteers who supply Islamic literature to Crimean Muslims, while looking after Chechen refugees.

Muslim individuals and groups have all along helped social and religious causes, but the proliferation of individual interest in Islamic activism, which often promotes the renewal of traditional Islamic norms, represents a massive qualitative shift in Muslim thinking. Peter Mandaville asserts that Muslims are “taking Islam into their own hands.”<sup>34</sup>

Islamic political parties, religious missionary groups and anti-Western guerrilla formations are part of this global ferment, but the driving force behind it is self-motivated individual Muslims. They have been awakened by the winds of modernity and freedom swirling around the world, and they are zealously promoting their material and cultural life, which is underpinned by Islam.

Gellner calls it Muslims’ “moral homecoming,” which reinforces their “shared identity.”<sup>35</sup> Their yearning to cultivate what he terms a “Reformed Islam”<sup>36</sup> has been the main source of contemporary Islamic resurgence. The Islamic revival is also being fueled by such other factors as the challenge of U.S. military and political domination of much of the Muslim world, Israeli occupation of Palestine and the stranglehold of autocratic governments and orthodox Muslim religious establishments. But the forward-looking spirit of individual Muslims is the most striking feature of this movement. Most of the Western media, whose interest in Islam is confined to terrorism and fundamentalism, appear to be missing this momentous phenomenon.

Dale F. Eickelman observes,

Buzzwords such as “fundamentalism” and catchy phrases such as Samuel Huntington’s “West versus the Rest” or Daniel Lerner’s “Mecca or mechanization,” are of little use in understanding this transformation. They obscure or even distort the immense spiritual and intellectual ferment that is taking place today among the world’s nearly one billion Muslims, reducing it in most cases to a fanatical rejection of everything modern, liberal or progressive. To be sure, such fanaticism – not exclusive to Muslim-majority societies – plays a part in what is happening, but it’s far from the whole story.<sup>37</sup>

In the West, Western-born Muslims are spearheading this reformist movement. Unlike their immigrant forebears from Muslim societies, they did not inherit a set of well-defined Islamic social and cultural values and symbols. They are challenged daily to find Islamic answers to existential questions that underscore the urgency of Islamic reforms. This challenge is the *sine qua non* of Western Muslim youths’ reformist orientation. In traditional Muslim societies, for example, borrowing and lending money on interest is judged un-Islamic. How does a Muslim operate in a Western economy run through banks, mortgage companies and credit cards? How does he perform Islamic praxis and observe dietary rules in the restrictive Western environment? How does he handle his divorce, inheritance and relationship to his wife, for which Western legal norms differ from Islamic laws (*Sharia*)?

#### EXEMPLARY TOLERANCE

Islam enjoins Muslims to use independent judgment, i.e. conduct *ijtihad*, to



determine Islamic rules in a new environment. A Muslim can be a *mujtahid* (one who performs *ijtihad*) if he fulfills two basic conditions. First, he must devote enough time and energy to the study of the Quran and examples of the Prophet to consider himself competent for the task. Secondly, he has to be familiar with the customary law of the land and “exigencies of human life.”<sup>38</sup> Most of the Islamic legal experts (*fuqaha*) available in the West today are immigrants whose understanding of Western legal systems and social environments is often inadequate. Western Muslims may have to wait another generation or two for indigenous Islamic scholarship and hermeneutical knowledge to develop and help build Western Islamic juridical norms and, eventually, Islamic epistemology.

The Western Muslim ethnocultural patches are bound to look different from the rest of the umma quilt. Islam’s basic belief system and praxis are uniform everywhere. To an extent, Muslims also have a common worldview. Aside from these, Islam has been a user-friendly religion that accommodates many of the social and cultural features of societies in which it takes root. Hence each Muslim society takes on its distinctive features. Contrary to the perception of Islam given by Muslim orthodoxy, the Quran is a message for mankind revealed in “a historic situation.”<sup>39</sup> Islam provides for *ijtihad* to adapt itself to different social contexts.

In most societies Muslims have taken rather wide liberty to adapt their faith to their environment. Arab Muslims hold on to pre-Islamic tribal values and structure, despite Islam’s revolutionary doctrine of social equality. In Iran, Muslims have cultivated the *Shii* sect of Islam. *Shii*

concepts and eschatology – the hidden imam, his return as Messiah at the end of time, the struggle between good and evil, or the forces of light and darkness, and so on – conjure up those of Mazdaism of ancient Iran. In my native Indian subcontinent, Muslims not only retain some of the old Hindu prejudices and customs but even observe forms of the Hindu caste system, which is repugnant to Islamic egalitarianism. Through it all, Muslims the world over retain a basic sense of selfhood that is not eroded by pluralist social environments.

If tribalism distinguishes Arab Islam, pluralism would perhaps be the most striking feature of Western Islam. The increasingly pluralist texture of Western societies, to which Muslims are contributing significantly, distinguishes these societies from their earlier versions. Pluralism also distinguishes Western Muslim communities from those Muslim societies in which nationalism, tribalism and ethnocentrism have shorn Islam of its pluralist ethos. Their new social environment requires Western Muslims to revive that ethos, which became Islam’s trademark during its two previous incarnations in Europe. Between the two, the Ottoman Turks are credited with developing an exemplary form of pluralism, arguably the finest example of interfaith tolerance in European history.

The Ottomans, whose conquest of the Byzantine Balkans and Asia Minor began in the 1290s, combined Islamic pluralist concepts with the Byzantine pluralist tradition. Rights of religious minorities were written into Byzantine law, and the early Ottomans built on it, encouraging “‘Islamochristian’ syncretism.”<sup>40</sup> Five of the six early Ottoman monarchs were born of Greek mothers. The syncretism eventually tapered off as the Ottomans attended



to furthering Islamic culture and Islamizing state laws. Yet they ensured wide religious and cultural autonomy to Christians and Jews under the so-called *millet* system. In the seventeenth century, when Western Europe was racked by the Thirty Years War and pogroms, the Ottoman capital of Istanbul was the only European city where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived relatively peacefully.

When Moorish Muslims invaded Spain and Portugal in the eighth century, they did not inherit a pluralist social structure there but allowed wide religious freedom to Christians and Jews. After the Moorish kingdoms were conquered by Catholics, however, Muslims were abused, expelled, forcibly baptized and occasionally slaughtered, and the 800-year-old Spanish Islamic civilization was expunged.

“One cannot but be struck,” deplores a contemporary historian, “by the way in which medieval Islam tolerated and cultivated the Christian and Jewish communities in its midst, whilst medieval Europe exploited, persecuted and finally destroyed its Muslim (and Jewish) subjects.”<sup>41</sup>

The pluralist trend is what distinguishes

today’s West from Christian Europe of the late Middle Ages. It conjures up, however imperfectly, the Byzantine and Ottoman social life. Of course there are Westerners and Western governments that betray inherent hostility to Muslims. The Bush administration is using the Patriot Act to harass them. Like the Jacques Chirac government in France, authorities in Belgium and several German states are considering barring Muslim girls from wearing headscarves to school. In many Western countries, public and government opposition to building mosques and Islamic schools remains stiff. All these appear to mark the last gasp of Eurocentrism, which will fade with the growth of native Muslim communities, integration of the global economy and dissemination of the consciousness of freedom and human rights, the West’s most important gift to humanity. And the Islamic space in the West will grow and nurture its distinctiveness as the Western Muslim continues to live, to borrow Geertz’s colorful simile, as “a fox among foxes, a crocodile among crocodiles . . . without any risk of losing one’s sense of who one is.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Taylor, “Minister’s Call to Choose Outrages Muslims,” *The Guardian*, London, November 22, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mandaville, “Towards a Critical Islam: European Muslims and the Changing Boundaries of Transnational Religious Discourse,” *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*, eds. Stefano Allievi and Jorgen S. Nielsen (Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 42, 44; Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, eds., *Muslim Travelers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Khalid Masud narrated the incident to the author in London on September 9, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 119-120.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> Author’s interview with Muhammad Anwar, Warwick University, Warwick, England, November 15, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Pipes and Lars Hedegaard, “Something Rotten in Denmark?” *The New York Post*, August 27, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> *Jati, Dharma O Probashi Musalman* (Bengali-language booklet: “Nationality, Religion and Diasporic Muslims”), Detroit, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, “Muslim Minorities in Europe,” *Modernizing Islam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers



University Press, 2003), p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Anchor Books, 1955), p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, "The Institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands, 1961-86," *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, eds. Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Gorg Lithman (New York: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1988), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Jorgen S. Nielsen, *Towards a European Islam* (Warwick, England: Center for Research in Ethnic Relations, 2000); Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim* (Leicester, England: The Islamic Foundation, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: Transformation of White America* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 12, 290.

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Malik, "Islam in Europe: Quest for a Paradigm," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, June 2001, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interviews with Mohammad Arkoun, Washington, DC, June 27, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Lucette Valensi, Paris, October 31, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Gellner, *Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ethnic Identity*, pp. 12, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald Early, "Understanding Integration," *Civilization*, October-November 1996, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Schyrtz, *Inevitable Surprises: Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence* (New York: Gotham Books, 2003), p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Said ibn Ahmed, a judge in the then Muslim city of Toledo, Spain, quoted in Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Omer Taspinar, "Europe's Muslim Street," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Oussama Cherribi, "The Growing Islamization of Europe," *Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East*, eds. John L. Esposito and Francois Burgat (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> George F. McLean, *Faith, Reason and Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), pp. 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998), chapters 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 10-12.

<sup>30</sup> *The Rise of Christian Europe*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> E.J. Dionne Jr., "In France, Scarves and Secularism," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Tariq Modood, "Introduction," and Ayse S. Calgar, "Hyphenated Identities and the Limits of 'Culture'," *The Politics of Multiculturalism in New Europe*, eds. Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1997), pp. 10, 170.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> *Translocal Muslim Space*, p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, "The Coming Transformation of the Muslim World," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Abul Ala Maududi, *First Principles of the Islamic State* (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publications, 1967), p. 13; Abu Husayn al-Basri quoted in Wael B. Hallaq, "Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, March 1984, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Heath W. Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 137.

<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Johns, "Christianity and Islam," *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, eds. John McManners (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 194.

<sup>42</sup> *Local Knowledge*, p. 68.