

The Islamic challenge: politics and religion in Western Europe

Jytte Klausen, 2005

Religious pluralism is an unintended consequence of unwanted immigration. It has raised difficult questions about the requirements of religious toleration, which Europeans are reluctant to face. The Madrid train-bombing on March 11, 2003, and the July 2005 bombings of the London tube system reinforced the perception that Islam and Islamism are threats to the European social and political system. Paradoxically, the two events also induced governments and politicians to reconsider the importance of government involvement in promoting integration.

Between 2002 and 2005, I interviewed three hundred European Muslim civic and political leaders who are part of what I describe as the new Muslim political elite (Klausen 2005). My questions aimed to discover how important faith is to the Muslim political leaders, and what consequences they drew from their faith and identity – if any – for public policy. I considered as “elite” anyone of Muslim faith or background who held elected or appointed office in political or civic organizations at the national, regional, or metropolitan level in one of six European countries – the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark. I interviewed parliamentarians, city councilors, leaders and spokespeople from civic associations, advocacy groups, and local and national umbrella organizations of mosque councils and inter-faith groups, and also some of Europe’s leading imams and Islamic scholars.

Why study the elite? Elites are a sociological fact. Democracies adapt in part by encapsulating and integrating new social groups and their political and civic leaders. The prospects for a future accommodation with Islam in Europe rests, to a large extent, on the ability of a Muslim elite to obtain influence and gain recognition as representative voices when it comes to debates on policies having to do with the position of Islam and Muslims within national institutions.

Political scientists often study politics through the lens of elite identity and preferences; it is common to focus on established elites such as parliamentarians or trade union leaders. In this case, the approach enabled me to focus on what the conflict looks like from the Muslim side. Islam is today the largest minority religious denomination in Europe. There are more Muslims than Catholics in the Protestant North, and more Muslims than Protestants in the predominantly Roman Catholic countries. There are about 15 million Muslims in Western Europe, but only a few dozen Muslims have been elected to European Parliaments. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that about one million Muslims were eligible to vote in the May 2005 election. The 2001 census, now a bit outdated, told us that there were 1.6 million Muslims in the country, just shy of three percent of population. In France, there are perhaps five to six million Muslims, but we really do not know because no reliable statistics exist. Some demographers argue 2.6 million is the more accurate number. No one knows how many Muslims can vote, but it appears that few do. The Netherlands has the highest concentration of Muslims relative to the population – six percent

of Dutch residents are Muslims; about half can vote. By contrast, there are an estimated three million Muslims in Germany of whom only about half a million can vote. In Italy, Muslims, like other immigrants, are overwhelmingly illegal: only an estimated 50,000 of Italy's two million Muslims can vote. With the exception of the few countries where the census asks people what their religion is, estimates are derived from immigration statistics and estimates of fertility rates among different population groups. The lack of accurate statistics invites speculation, and wildly exaggerated predictions of a Muslim "population take-over" circulate. Ethnicity and national origin also varies greatly from country to country. Most European Muslims are from South Asia or Turkey. Arabs are a minority estimated at around twenty percent of all European Muslims, but are predominant in France. Increasing numbers are Africans. National origin matters because Islamic practices vary widely across countries of origin. Nonetheless, ethnic diversity is also muted by shared experience. It is at least in part because of this extraordinary diversity that Muslims speak the national languages of Europe when they meet in political or civic organizations.

Diversity has increased in recent years, in part because of increased immigration of political refugees from new areas of conflict and, in part, because of the growing presence of native-born Muslims, who prefer to speak the language they have grown up with. The early waves of immigrants to Europe held on to the "myth of return," the idea that their exile was temporary, and they organized in transnational networks with the primary aim of retaining contact to the "home" country.

In the 1990s the émigré associations of the past gave way to new national associations. These were often modeled on organizations created for other faiths. Both the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, formed in 1997) and the Council of Muslims in Germany, Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (ZMD, formed in 1995) imitate the Jewish Council in organization and objectives. The French Council for the Islamic Faith, Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, CFCM, finally set up by the government in 2002 after several false starts, was based upon the model of the Consistoire for Jews created in 1808. With the notable exception of terrorists and radical clerics, European Muslims' political engagement and expectations have, since the 1990s, increasingly become framed in national European idioms. Who are the Muslim leaders? There were several surprises. We tend to assume that the current generation of Muslim leaders, and other immigrant-origin groups, are generally the educated and integrated descendants of earlier waves of migrants. Many of the people I interviewed referred to themselves as "typically second-generation." The term, it turned out, was used metaphorically to describe a political outlook focused on integration and acceptance of European norms and expectations. In actuality most of the current generation of leaders are not native-born but themselves immigrants.

The numbers varied among the six countries in the study but few of the leaders I interviewed were born in Europe. Most had arrived as young adults, either as political refugees or as students. Some said that they had come at a time when the rules were not yet so restrictive and had migrated because they were threatened by the security services of their home countries as student activists. About a handful of the parliamentarians in the study had come as political refugees, obtained citizenship, and stood for election in the span of a decade. Most of the leaders had completed secondary education prior to coming and were from middle-class families with histories of learning and political engagement. The share of native-born leaders was higher in Great Britain and the Netherlands than elsewhere, undoubtedly a reflection of the earlier onset of mass migration to those countries.

Elected office aside, citizenship is not a legal prerequisite for civic and political engagement, but it matters greatly in practice. A minority of the leaders is native-born (one or two out of five in my study) but most are citizens. The non-naturalized leaders, between one-tenth and one-quarter of the respondents, were not elected officials but participated in civic associations. In Denmark and Germany, both countries with particularly restrictive naturalization laws, between one-tenth and one-quarter of the political leaders I identified did not have citizenship. One out of ten of the French participants were not citizens, a figure that puts France below Britain, Sweden, and The Netherlands in terms of legal assimilation. Fouad Ajami and Neil Ferguson have both argued that European Muslims have brought their political agendas with them from their countries of origin. They argue that Europe's Muslim associations are "Trojan horses" for organizations banned in Islamic countries, and that Muslim political activism in Europe is driving a wedge between the US and Europe on important foreign policy issues.

At first blush, my findings seem to support this thesis in two ways. First, the present generation of leaders consists mostly of recent immigrants, who were politically active before coming to Europe. And second, being Muslim "matters." Increasingly, political issues and preferences are shaped by a growing sense of faith or ethno-religious origin and background. It does not follow, however, that the political agenda is that of the banned Islamist organizations. They are a source of political inspiration for some individuals, but so are human rights, democracy, the anti-war movement, feminism, and faith itself. But because restrictive access to naturalization acts as a barrier to immigrant participation in mainstream political organizations, Muslims are frequently pushed to organize in "Muslim-only" organizations.

The political refugees, who came in the 1980s when European policies were lenient, adhered to many different ideologies and many more of them were liberals than Islamists. Many of the interviewees described themselves as, in a way, fighting the same battle now that they had fought before. Only four or five cases out of the three hundred people in the study said that their objective was an Islamic state. For others it was human rights, the fight against fundamentalism, or, in some cases, freedom from religious compulsion of any sort. To be a "Muslim" is both a religious and an ethnic description of self. Islam is the name of the religion. A Muslim, or in the case of women, a Muslima, is a person who practices Islam. Strict adherence to these definitions would make the label "secular Muslim" a contradiction in terms. We do not readily speak of a "secular Christian." Yet such are the real-life complexities of taxonomies that people readily accept: being Muslim is not just a matter of faith, but also a sociological fact. "Muslim" is an ethnic category and a description of origin, as well as a faith. Muslims are Europe's new religious and ethnic minority. Individuals balance what matters most in different ways. For some, faith is the only source of identity, but for many others faith takes a backseat to country of origin, particularly in the context of increasing hostility towards Muslims and their characterization as "others." The label "Muslim" is, so to speak, "in play." As stereotypes of who Muslims are and what they want, or do not want, are propagated in the media and by xenophobic politicians, Muslims react to the perceived bias and appropriate the label as a source of counter-mobilization. Muslims describe the "culture war" as Islamophobia. The term connotes an irrational fear of Islam, which they believe drives the biased and preconceived depictions in the papers and politicians' speeches. Non-practicing Muslims self-identify as Muslims and say they are victimized by Islamophobes who discriminate against them because of preconceived stereotypes of all Muslims as fanatics. Believers feel singled out and misrepresented because people have the wrong idea about Islam. Both groups respond by asserting their identity. Needless to say, the radicals do so as well; they weave the experience of bias into a conspiratorial tale about injustice and persecution and propose a political Islamist utopia as a solution.

It is common among observers of European politics to assume that the "integrated" Muslims, who participate in political life, have also left their faith behind. The German term Kultur-Muslim,

“culturally-Muslim,” is often used to describe individuals who do put their faith on display. But it is a fallacy to presume that religiosity is incompatible with civic competence and, conversely, to assume that the integrated Muslims are apostates. In my interviews, I found that faith matters greatly to most Muslims and that religiosity does not predict political affiliations. Most of the leaders in my study said that Islam was important to them personally. Three out of five said their faith was very important, one out of five that it is sometimes important, and only one out of five said that it was not important.

Among the very religious, most said they belonged to the political center or left. The single largest subgroup in my study consisted of personally religious self-described centrists. Non-believers, in contrast, belonged mostly to the far left or to the secular conservative parties. Many religious Muslims indicated that ideally they would support the Christian Democratic parties. In the Netherlands, Muslims have joined the Christian Democratic Party in large numbers and two Muslims were elected to the Parliament from the CDA. The German Christian Democratic Party has chosen instead to re-emphasize Christianity as a prerequisite for being German, and many German Muslims regretfully concluded that they cannot support the party and turned instead to the Greens.

Europe’s Christian Democratic parties have long used the term “secularly Christian” to describe their distinctive objectives, and only the Dutch CDA has responded to the presence of non-Christian conservative voters by developing an Abrahamic approach to the representation of the interests of believers.

Abortion, gay rights, and bio-ethics are some of the issue areas where religious Muslims find common ground with other religious associations and lobbies. The MCB has steadfastly maintained that homosexuality is a sin and has joined the Anglican and the Roman Catholic Churches in opposing gay adoption rights. When the organization’s General Secretary, Iqbal Sacranie, (replaced in 2006 by Dr. Muhammad Abdul Bari) was criticized for saying that same-sex relationships risked “damaging the foundations of society,” the MCB pointed to the split in the Anglican Church over gays and declared that Muslims would not be “bullied” into speaking against scripture.

Nonetheless, many religious Muslims regard “value conservatism” as less salient than other issues that are generally important for the left, in particular anti-discrimination enforcement and social protection. Centrist Muslims often migrate to the Green parties, because of the parties’ emphasis upon human rights. The preponderance of centrists among the more religious leaders may also reflect a deliberate decision on the part of the national Muslim civic associations to avoid becoming identified with, and being taken for granted by, the Social Democratic or Labor parties that historically have been able to count on immigrant voters.

Party choice is contingent on values, but also on what is offered from the political parties. French Muslims complained bitterly about the Socialist party’s intolerance of religious expression, and tended to remark that one had to be committed to “the holy principle of laïcité” to succeed in the party.

There was greater agreement on practical policy. When I asked what should be done about the integration of Islam, consensus was that ties to Islamic countries must be severed and that ways must be found to educate imams at European universities and to normalize the legal situation of mosque communities according to national laws. There were disagreements about how far to push for equity with Christian churches. Some mentioned what they saw as government pressures to

“Christianize” Islam, yet agreed that European Muslims must sever ties with the Islamic world. Many leaders argued that governments should provide “help for self-help,” but otherwise leave Muslims to build their faith institutions as they pleased. Others argued for straightforward legal and institutional parity: “[W]hat goes for the pastor goes for the imam,” said a Danish city councilor. Consensus was that European Islam must be detached from Islamic countries, and that European governments must help. One of the main characteristics of the development of Islam over the past 200 years is the collapse of religious authority. In Europe, migration has allowed Islam to develop in the absence of clerical control. One consequence is a return to the “book.” Many young people told me that they were learning Arabic and reading the Koran to “make up their own mind” about its meaning. It is, of course, illusory to think that the text is accessible in the absence of theory or interpretation, and while some of Europe’s Muslims celebrate the freedom to interpret the Koran independently, others battle to protect orthodoxy against assimilation. Mosque communities have become an important building-block for Muslim civic and political engagement in Europe. The large national associations in France, Germany, and Britain, all in one way or another have mosque communities as the basic unit of organization. Mosque communities are also building blocks for other types of self-help groups and for civic involvement in local politics and interfaith dialogue. Much is said about the unfortunate role of politicized clerics in shaping the political consciousness of European Muslims, but in reality it is the mosque managers and mosque councils who are the more important civic actors – they hire the imams and run the affairs of the mosque.

There may be about 8,000 mosques in Western Europe, not including the many small and informal prayer rooms that exist in community centers and store fronts. While this may seem to be a lot because Europe is widely regarded as a Christian continent, it is not a large number considering the large number of European Muslims (some 15 million.) The building momentum and the demand for educated and professional imams are likely to continue as Muslims benefit from integration and increased prosperity. Nonetheless, serious questions remain about how to provide the resources necessary to sustain the institutionalization of Islam in Europe.

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