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Europe and Migration

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To what extent does Islam affect the integration of Muslim people within European countries compared to other issues related to migration?

From the 1950s onwards, a considerable amount of immigrants entered Europe from many countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Turkey. This process of migration was brought about by a shortage of labour in Europe, especially France and Germany, partly due to the emigration in those countries caused by World War Two. To help solve this problem, intergovernmental contracts were introduced with eight Mediterranean countries including Turkey (1961 and 1964), Morocco (1963) and Tunisia (1965) to import young, healthy workers, mostly men, and house them together so that they could return to their home countries together once there was no longer any need for them. Recruitment offices were set up by the German Federal Labour Office (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit or BFA) in these countries to select suitable workers and give out short term residence and work permits (*Kaya & Kentel, 2005:17*). For those who were looking for better economic prospects and a higher quality of life, this provided a great opportunity to earn more money and provide a better lifestyle for their families. The idea was for these immigrants to go over as guest workers and stay for a temporary period of time, before returning to their homelands. This was a proposal which suited both parties, as many of the immigrants “came with the intention of earning money, supporting their families, investing in sources back home and, eventually, returning to their countries of origin” (*Benn & Jawad, 2003:12*). However in reality, the majority of immigrants started to build new lives in their countries of residence; getting married, having children and educating them there. As their lives developed in their new country or residence, they were soon joined by their friends and family, forming small communities and

sometimes, as a consequence, alienating themselves from the native residents. These immigrants faced the hard task of trying to integrate into their new environments by learning the language and becoming familiar with the culture, whilst at the same time trying to preserve the traditions, language and culture of their country of origin and pass them onto their children. An important aspect in the matter of their integration was of course religion. Although Europe was a predominantly Christian society, religion did not play an important role and therefore, they viewed it as basically secular. “The question for them was how to maintain their religious-national identity in a secular environment.” (*Parekh, 2008:6*). In this essay I aim to ascertain the main issues which affect the integration of immigrants from Muslim nations within European countries and to find out to what extent their religion plays a role.

The welfare state is an issue frequently brought up in the debate on immigration. When politicians find it difficult to explain problems such as housing shortages, crime or unemployment rate, they often use immigrants as a scapegoat which has a negative effect on the general public’s perception of them and reinforces xenophobic tendencies (*Bodemann & Yurdakul, 2006:111*). As the number of migrants in Europe continues to grow and exert pressure on the welfare state, there is every reason to expect that they will continue to press demands of recognition and it is hard to understand how the welfare state can cope with these demands (*Kymlicka and Banting, 2006:4*). It is interesting to note that although in the past it has tended to be the right wing parties who opposed immigration and multiculturalism, who viewed them as a threat to national traditions and values, it is increasingly the left who oppose them, viewing them as a perceived threat to the welfare state (*Kymlicka and Banting, 2006:4*). In recent years there has been an increasing tax resistance in Europe which can be explained by a lack of common identity. Wolfe and Klausen state that in the early days of the British welfare state, “people believed they were paying the social welfare part of their taxes

to people who were like themselves” (*Kymlicka and Banting, 2006:3*). People were willing to make sacrifices to support their disadvantaged citizens as they viewed them as “one of us”. However “if the ties that bind you to increasingly diverse fellow citizens are loosened, you are likely to be less inclined to share your resources with them” (*Wolfe and Klausen cited in Kymlicka and Banting, 2006:11*).

Yet if this is the case and immigrants put such pressure on the welfare states of European countries, then why is it that Muslim immigrants are singled out as being such a threat as opposed to other immigrants living in those countries who have a much smaller impact? Citizens in many western countries distinguish “good” immigrant groups, who are seen as hard-working and law-abiding and hence deserving of reasonable multi-cultural accommodations, from “bad” immigrant groups, who may be seen as illegal or lazy, or as prone to crime, religious fanaticism, or political extremism (*Kymlicka & Banting, 2006: 8*). This may explain why Polish immigrants were able to settle in huge numbers in the UK with very little opposition. They are generally viewed by the British public as hard working, honest people with similar cultural, religious and moral values and were able to integrate into society relatively successfully and peacefully. The Danish magazine *The National Post*, published a racist article by Lars Hedegaard and Daniel Pipes not long after the cartoon affair, entitled “Something rotten in Denmark?” which referred to Muslim immigrants. The article portrayed these immigrants as lazy people living on the dole, who constitute 5% of the population but consume more than 40% of the welfare state spending. It also claimed that they make up the majority of the country’s convicted rapists, criticised them for having forced marriages and also for threatening to kill those who convert out of Islam. Although the article was widely criticised for having inaccurate statistics, it also had many supporters (*Parekh, 2008:13*). Another reason why Muslim immigrants are different from other immigrants entering European countries is that no other group of immigrants have made such

high demands or put such pressure on the government to change the laws to suit their religious needs. In the 1960s they began to set up welfare associations along religious national lines. They built a huge amount of mosques “and began to demand that state schools make appropriate provisions for their children, including halal meat, facilities for prayer, exemption for girls from sports, swimming and other activities that required them to wear shorts, and teaching children their history and culture” (*Parekh, 2008:7*). Even those Europeans who felt sympathetic towards Muslims thought they were too demanding. “When the request for halal meat was met, they asked for time off for prayer at workplaces. When the latter was met, they asked to ban blasphemous books. And when that was met, they wanted recognition of polygamy. And after that, they pressed for interest-free loans, Islamic banks and Insurance companies. In the ultimate analysis they wanted to live in Europe on their terms. Their goal is to replace the “heathen” and “decadent” European with an Islamic civilisation” (*Parekh, 2008:11*). As no other minority group had ever made such demands, the general public and public institutions were naturally resistant to meet these demands and wanted to protect their customs and values. Many felt that they were asking too much and that if they were not happy living within the country’s rules then they should go back to their country of origin.

Despite the historic conflict between Christianity and Islam dating back to the 7th century when Islam came into existence, for example the Crusades, colonisation and the more recent process of de-colonisation, of which the wounds are still fresh and rich in consequences (*Macheral, 2003:289*), non-Christians in Europe have been able to practice their religion relatively freely, with little opposition due to the tolerant, progressive and multi-cultural policies of most European countries. In France for example, the French Ministry of Education authorise Jewish students to absent themselves from examinations on Saturdays. The construction of mosques is also freely permitted and the Government supports

L’Institute du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) and a major step was taken to establish the French Council of the Muslim Religion (Conseil français du culte musulman). All this has been achieved despite the fact that France is a strongly secular country and by making these concessions, it weakens the principle of Laicite put into place in 1905 (*Kaya, 2009:70*). These policies are set in place to enable Muslims carry out their religious duties in a similar way to how they would do in their countries of origin. It should be taken into consideration at this point, that the same cannot be said for European migrants in Muslim countries. For example, the Turkish Government has prohibited the construction of churches in Turkey since 1923 (*Kaiser, 2003:279*) even though there are many European Christians living in Turkey.

In recent years however, things are slowly starting to change with regards to European attitudes and willingness to tolerate ethnic minorities. The people in Europe are becoming more reluctant to bend over backwards for the religious demands of their fellow Muslim citizens. This was demonstrated for example in Switzerland’s 2009 referendum on the construction of minarets. It came as a shock to many and an embarrassment for some that the Swiss people voted “yes” to the prohibition of building minarets which were higher than the mosques themselves. The Netherlands is another example of opinions changing towards immigration and in particular, Muslim immigration. When Muslim migrants began arriving in the Netherlands in huge numbers, the Dutch were very welcoming and accepting. The government gave a huge amount of money to the construction of Muslims schools, ethnic organisations, newspapers, broadcasting facilities and mosques (*Kaya, 2009:120*). They even imported Imams from Muslim countries to teach in the Islamic schools as they were perceived as potentially useful actors in fulfilling the integration of young generations of Muslim origin to the wider society (*Kaya, 2009:121*). However a number of international events, such as 9/11, and internal events such as the Murder of Theo Van Gogh for the

production of his film “Submission” which criticised the rights of women in Islam, contributed to the changing of Dutch public opinion and led many to believe Islam was a threat to the Netherlands. The Dutch ethnic minority policy in the 1980s involved “emancipation” for Muslims and “combating disadvantage” which put a great deal of effort into integration whilst at the same time, providing primary education in the language of the country of origin for many immigrants. By 2003, this policy had dramatically changed and it was widely accepted that “people must integrate into, and understand the norms and values of, a broadly tolerant Dutch community” (*Kaya, 2009:127*) and the preservation of minority cultures was described as a responsibility of each specific community and no longer a public commitment (*Kaya, 2009:130*). The change of attitude towards accepting Muslim immigrants has even gone so far as to say “become Dutch or leave” and migrants are now forced to take an examination on Dutch culture and language if they wish to obtain citizenship. “Why is it that a country that has institutionalised the acceptance of difference and that was reputed for its tolerance could shift so quickly to what is perceived as coercive and assimilationist policy?” (*Bodemann & Yurdakul, 2006:121*)

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington of September 11th 2001 played a huge role in this shift of attitude towards Muslims and from that point onwards, people became more aware of the Muslim presence in Europe which in turn, sparked off a fear of the unknown. Many people had misconceived perceptions of Muslims and believed rumours that all Muslims are linked to terrorism. In Holland for example, imams were negatively perceived as they were believed to be preaching hatred and anti-western sentiments (*Kaya, 2009:122*). In the aftermath of 9/11, many incidents of violence towards Muslims took place in the western world and in particular, towards Muslim women, whose religious head scarves and clothing had become a political symbol (*Parekh, 2008:6*). For example, in the United Kingdom, more than 300 assaults on Muslims were reported in the first three months after the

terrorist attacks (*Eurobarometer, 2001, cited in Bodemann & Yurdakul, 2006:115*). In the past decade, there have been many issues concerning Muslims in Europe, which have contributed to the atmosphere of tension between the two religious faiths. For example in September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published controversial cartoons which were deemed by the Islamic world as blasphemous, Islamophobic and racist. This sparked off huge riots and violent protests and the torching of the Danish Embassy in Syria, Lebanon and Iran. European flags were also desecrated in Gaza city. These events triggered western support for Denmark resulting in a further divide between the “East” and the “West”. Other European countries have had similar issues to deal with, polygamy in Sweden being one issue and Imams in Britain another. The London and Madrid bombings were crucial events, which for many Europeans cast a suspicious light onto Muslims living in the European community. It is important to note that the media has played a significant role in dramatising this conflict, and small incidents involving one or two individuals have been blown out of all proportion to become national and even international issues. This was the case with the cartoons in Denmark and also in France when a headmaster in a school in Noyon (north of Paris) expelled 3 girls from school for refusing to take off her headscarf in the classroom. The parents of one of the girls took the headmaster of the school to court and as a consequence, teachers from other schools around France went on strike to petition against the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in schools. Since then, many more girls have been excluded from school for the same reason and in 2003, president Jacques Chirac prohibited the wearing of visible religious symbols in school. Incidents such as these do not only have consequences in themselves, as examples of clashes of civilisation but they also affect people’s perceptions of Islam in Europe, (*Allievi & Nielsen, 2002:14*) coupling Muslims with essentialism, fundamentalism, violence, terror and dissidence (*Kaya, 2009:140*). It is interesting to note that incidents that happen outside Europe, or which concern specific countries “become the

lenses through which we interpret the possible behaviour of Muslims in Europe, even when they come from non-concerned countries (*Allievi & Nielsen, 2002:14*).

These issues and events have contributed to feelings of hostility between Christianity and Islam and a raised awareness of otherness. This in turn has triggered sentiments of nationalism on both sides and has widened the gap between East and West. European countries are starting to change their immigration policies, keeping Muslim immigrants particularly in mind. With the massive influx of migrants entering Europe in the past few decades, of which more than 15 million are Muslim (*Parekh, 2008:6*), it is no surprise that the question has been raised about security issues, and some see these immigrants as a threat to their national identity and security. Rotterdam is now 50% minority, and already 65% of primary and secondary students in Rotterdam and Amsterdam are of non-Dutch origin. Dutch-Muslims have significantly higher birth rates than native Dutch, whose population is aging and shrinking. Christianity now ranks second to Islam in the Netherlands' leading religious presence (*Kaya, 2009:120*). These statistics seem overwhelming and can trigger fear that Islam is taking over in the west. A Lutheran Bishop once said to underline the public fear caused by the Islamic ascendancy in the Netherlands: "I fear that we are approaching a situation resembling the tragic fate of Christianity in Northern Africa in Islam's early days" (*cited in Carle, 2006: 70 – Kaya, 2009:120*).

In conclusion, when taking into account all the things that effect the integration of Muslim citizens into European countries, it is clear that religion is a strong aspect. Even if religion plays a small role in the lives of these citizens, the recent events which have emphasised the growing rift between Islam and Christianity and the media's hype related to these issues have all had consequences on the way European Muslims are regarded by non-Muslim citizens and accounts for the attacks on innocent Muslim people. They often claim they do not feel respected by western citizens and they are treated as outsiders. In France

there had been a growing feeling that its Muslim population remained only “paper French” (*Parekh, 2008:9*). The fact that young Muslims seem to be bonding not on their national identity, that is to say their parents’ or grandparents’ country of origin, but on their Muslim identity (*Parekh, 2008:8*) creates a more dramatic impression of “us” against “them” as they are bound together by their religion. The demands that they make on the grounds of their religion cause tension and make the non-Muslim European citizens uneasy, feeling as though their customs and culture is being disrespected and slowly wiped out. Therefore it is fair to say that religion is a key issue regarding the integration of immigrants, and Islam plays a strong role in the matter of integration.

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