

Recovering the Middle Path:
From Indifferent Tolerance to Critical Engagement
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The relationship between the Muslim world and Western societies is one of the global problems of our day and age. Thanks to the pervasive nature of globalization, what happens in Washington, London or France has an immediate impact on what positions are taken in Istanbul, Cairo or Kuala Lumpur. Globalization has brought us all closer. Getting to know each other from close up, however, is not always an easy, smooth or even pleasant experience. It may result some pleasant surprises and enriching experiences. But it may also result in disappointment, frustration and mistrust. In the current state of relations between Muslim and Western societies, we are doomed when we refuse to recognize each other as equals. Yet, we also face tremendous difficulties when we show the courage and honesty of knowing each other closely because there is too long a history of doubt, mistrust and refusal.

Today, living together is no longer confined to living in the same city or country. Geographical and political boundaries turn into trivial details when it comes to the shared space of thought, imagination and feeling. Living together becomes a burden and threat when this space, which is so dear to the heart and mind of every human being, is ridiculed, underestimated, attacked or destroyed. It is at such moments of violence that we lose our resolve to defend the middle path and begin to see extremism of various kinds, i.e., economic, political, religious, cultural, as a refuge and basis for our oppositional identities. This is where Muslim sentiments collide with those of the West, ordinary people with sound minds become suspects or enemies.

As we experience it today, the form and scale of living together is a new phenomenon in the history of humanity. In no other period in history have human beings been so open and vulnerable to what others think and do. Blessed ignorance or calculated indifference is only a luxury which comes at a high cost. Neither a New Yorker can ignore the Middle East peace process nor can an Egyptian turn a blind eye to the uninspiring and tasteless work of few Danish cartoonists. Whether we see it as a challenge or threat, we live together and try to make sense of our lives through the lenses of such a real and demanding experience.

This is especially true when we consider the large number of Muslims living in Europe and the United States. Today, about one fourth of world's Muslim population lives as minorities from India and Western China to Africa and Europe. This is a new phenomenon and will take generations to adjust to. In their history, Muslims have always lived as a majority politically, economically and culturally even when they were outnumbered by local populations. The modern period brought an end to this and a new situation emerged where living together with

communities of different religious and cultural traditions has become a prominent fact of our lives.

Living together is one thing; being aware of it something quite different. At the risk of being simplistic, I shall divide our experience of sharing the world into three periods. The first is what the pre-modern cultures and societies have experienced. The traditional societies were able to manage to exist as more or less independent, isolated and integral units. There have always been interactions with other cultures and civilizations. But this was not a condition for the long and healthy existence of a civilization. A Chinese painter could easily produce some of the most beautiful works of art without knowing anything about Islamic miniatures or Christian icons. No matter how close one remains to his/her own tradition, it is no longer possible to remain oneself without recognizing the reality of others, close and distant.

Curiously enough, in the middle ages there were two major civilizations that were the exceptions to the rule: Islamic and Western. There are no two civilizations in world history that have been so intimately intertwined with one another as these two. We cannot understand the development of Islamic science and philosophy without acknowledging the debt of Muslim scholars to ancient Greek thought. Nor can we talk about medieval Europe without the heavy influence of Islamic thought on the scholastic tradition. It is because of this long history that the two have always seen the other as its worthy rival.

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of a new model of cultural development. The rise of the West as the dominant force of the modern world created a Euro-centric world with its science, political discourse, imperialism, arts, novels, economy and social stratification. Euro-centrism has never been simply a matter of economic and military might. It has manifested itself in such diverse areas as culture, arts, historical consciousness, philosophy, urban design, architecture, humanities, and so on. Its hallmark has been pushing others to the margins of human history. Whether these others are Muslims, Russians, Chinese, African-Americans or Native Americans, it makes little difference.

Today, we're still struggling with this imagery of a uni-polar world. Euro-centrism is a global problem and hurts not only non-Western societies but also Westerners themselves. A uni-polar world only leads to the marginalization of the vast majority of world populations. This marginalization can be economic, political, intellectual or artistic. No matter how it happens, it strips people of a sense of meaning and purpose. Much of the current sentiment of dispossession and frustration we see in the non-Western world is a direct result of this.

These two models of cultural and civilizational order can no longer provide a sense of security and participation for all citizens of the world. A multi-polar and multi-centered world in the widest sense of the term has to arise to undo the misdeeds of both cultural isolationism and Euro-centrism. The future of Islamic, Western and other societies depends on this essential point. This is also the way forward for including large number of Muslims living in Europe as citizens and legal immigrants.

A multi-polar and pluralist world is not a world without any standards or values. It is a world in which all cultures and societies are seen as equals but urged to vie for the common good. This is not a wishy-washy multiculturalism which runs the risk of eroding any common grounds between cultures and communities. Rather, it is an act of enriching oneself by recognizing others. A shared framework of ideas and values can emerge only within such contexts of communicative action. Today, Muslims living in Europe and Europeans

interacting with Muslims have this chance of enriching themselves by recovering the middle path of preserving one's identity while recognizing others. It is through such acts that we can foster an ethics and culture of coexistence which will not tolerate racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims as well as the demonization of Christians and other communities.

Part of the problem lies in creating a conflict between an absolute self and an absolute other. Much of the language of clash today is based on such an opposition where Islam is set against such universal values as justice, equality, human rights and human dignity. Speaking of the self and the other in terms of a binary opposition, however, does not necessarily have to lead to an essential conflict. The distance between the self and the other is and could be construed as a healthy tension in expanding one's self-understanding and reaching out to the world around us. No matter how we define the self and the other, it is impossible to eradicate the distance between the two.

There is a further danger in trying to dissolve all boundaries between the self and the other: it creates a sense of insecurity and homelessness, which we see everywhere today from the streets of Cairo to Spain. In many ways, globalization has further deepened this sense of insecurity. This is felt deeply especially in Muslim countries where the eroding impact of modernization has created a further sense of mistrust and resentment towards the modern world in general and the West in particular.

Muslims living in Europe today face similar tensions. What is currently being asked of them in the name of integration is usually assimilation and a call for losing their identities. They are asked to become French, German or Danish as if there are such neat identities that can be applied to all Europeans. Combined with the deep-rooted culture of mistrust and suspicion, this results in the further alienation of European Muslims and forces them to become a sub-culture within European societies. Whether Muslims are considered religious communities or ethnic minorities, they are seen as an other and as a security issue.

But Islam and Muslims are no longer a distant phenomenon, existing in some far away part of the world. They are part and parcel of the cultural and demographic fabric of Europe. Furthermore, Europe cannot expect to have immigrants without a face, identity, culture and values. Take the example of Turkish workers in Germany. When they were invited by the German government to help rebuild post-war Germany, they were seen as guest workers to provide a mere work force for German factories. There was hardly any debate on integrating these manual workers at the time. Forty years later, we have suddenly awakened to the reality of Turks living in Kreuzberg, Berlin, Munich and other places in Germany as if they have just got off the plane yesterday. They have been there for over four decades and no one has noticed them. Yesterday, we did not care if any of these guest workers spoke German or learnt about German culture. Now, we want them to speak perfect German (many of whom do anyway), know German culture and history better than the native Germans, and test their level of civility by asking them the most sensitive and controversial questions to which most ordinary Germans would respond negatively.

The rising tide of political and intellectual conservatism across Europe feeds this deep and often dormant opposition to the presence of Muslims in Europe. What cannot be said about any other religion or race are easily being said for Islam and Muslims. The ethnic and religious diversity of Europe is reduced to one single block with no place for Muslim communities.

An exclusivist identity politics underlies all this. In fact, much of the current debate about immigration and integration in Europe is underlined by an attempt to create a European identity in opposition to such others as Muslims, Jews, Asians, Africans, or simply immigrants. But to be a global power, Europe has to recognize its own diversity and strengthen its pluralism so that it can continue to be a place of freedom, creativity, innovation and socio-political interaction. There is greater awareness about this across Europe today. But we are far from saying that this is the mainstream position as far as minority communities are concerned.

Religion continues to be a major social force in the world. Much of the rhetoric of clash uses a religious language. At this point, the religious sources of tolerance must be mobilized to address the issues of racism, discrimination and intolerance. Religious leaders must play an active role in calling for a peaceful co-existence with communities of other faiths. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and others must come together on issues of common concern and develop common strategies. Yet, this must be done in a responsible and inclusive way. For instance, I can't tell a Jew or Christian how to interpret his/her sacred text but I can argue with him/her for the conditions of living together. Ultimately, this is an ethical position and must be articulated by using both religious and non-religious arguments.

Practical Suggestions

A number of important initiatives have already been taken to address these urgent issues and raise awareness about the Muslim communities in Europe. There is a healthy discussion going on about different models of integration such as integration through participation and accommodation, constitutional citizenship and democratic representation. We need to continue this debate to come up with concrete measures to combat discrimination and intolerance. Along these lines, I would like to suggest the following.

1. We need to develop more direct and active cooperation between European institutions and Muslim communities through NGOs, research centers, mosques, academic and leaders. This should be done through focusing on such specific issues as religious freedom in the work place, cases of discrimination in employment, housing and schools, and Muslims and the law enforcement. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which is the largest international organization representing 57 Muslim states, should be part of such initiatives.
2. To fight against Islamophobia, centers for monitoring Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims must be established across Europe. These centers should work in cooperation with state agencies and Muslim organizations. Member states should support these centers and help with collecting data and making them available to the public. There should be tangible incentives to get all sides together.
3. We are far from having any serious and comprehensive survey of Muslims in European countries. To raise awareness about Islam and Muslims in Europe, we need to increase the study of European Muslims by opening new programs and giving grants and scholarships. Major European universities are best suited for such a work and this will help tremendously in mapping out the current state of Muslims in Europe as individuals and communities. Such a study will help determine priorities as well as with policy planning and implementation.

4. Religious leaders and imams play a key role in the public discourse of Muslims both inside and outside their communities. There should be a concerted effort to support training programs for imams and other religious functionaries. These programs should focus on inter-communal and inter-faith relations. This should be done through consultations with local Muslim communities and umbrella organizations in Europe.
5. European countries with large Muslim populations should be encouraged to follow Austria's lead and recognize Islam as part of the religious fabric of their nations. At this point in history, this is more of a symbolic act but will send a very positive message to all Muslims in and outside Europe. The Muslim communities should be encouraged to bring up this issue with their respective governments.
6. The teaching of Islam and Muslims in European countries is both a challenge and opportunity. School curricula should include courses and sessions on ethnic and religious communities in Europe. To this end, two parallel projects should be conducted. The first is the training of middle and high school teachers about the subject. Some states and school boards in the US have done such seminars, sessions and workshops and they have been extremely helpful in raising awareness about Islam and Muslims. The second is the study of school curricula and school books in Europe. An extensive survey of what is being taught and not taught about Islam and Muslims in middle and high schools will provide a useful roadmap for substantial revisions and adjustments. For this, a series of conferences should be held on the teaching of Islam and Muslims in European institutions of learning. This could be held at the national level first and then across Europe.
7. Youth activities need little explanation. OSCE may designate a "Youth Diversity Year" and initiate a number of programs for youth from European and Muslim countries as well as from the United States. There are a number of such programs and they should be studied to come with different models of exchange programs.
8. Educating the media about Islam, Muslims, Islamophobia and other related issues is a crucial and sensitive issue. There is some good work done by various organizations in Europe. They should be supported and increased on a regular basis. The media should be encouraged to develop a proper language vis-à-vis Muslims. The decision not to use the word "Islamic terrorism" in official European documents, for instance, is a positive step and should be expanded to other areas of media coverage and public discourse. Muslim organizations should be encouraged to have media contact persons but these persons should be equipped with the necessary skills. Also, there should be more opportunities for the employment of Muslim reporters and journalists in the mainstream media.