

“A Tragic and Intractable Phenomenon”

The Expansion of West European Islam

By David Golding

When the Normans and the Spanish *reconquista* put an end to Muslim expansion in Spain, Sicily, and southern Italy in 1492, an early population of European Muslims left permanently for other lands. Two other populations of Muslims remained in Europe, first with the spread of Mongol armies during the thirteenth century stretching from the Volga to the Crimea, and later with the Ottoman expansion into the Balkans and central Europe. These populations still survive in Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Romania, and Greece, and represent the traditional European Muslim community.¹ Nevertheless, the Muslim presence in Europe was small before World War II, and hardly existed in western Europe.² As Europe expanded its influence through the Early Modern period and into the Enlightenment, Islam was no more than a potential outside religious threat and Muslims were not considered a European ethnic group by anyone's standard. They occupied the general European psyche only as a player in the legendary crusades Europe's finest knights had once fought in their battles with the Moors, yet, European society identified itself more with Christianity, the Roman Empire, and the Enlightenment, not with near-eastern ethnic groups.³

A fourth phase of Islamic expansion in Europe began after World War II that endured into the present and confronted the traditional European definition of self. Though foundations were laid long before the post-War period, a recent rise in Muslim communities in western Europe has marked a contemporary expansion of Islam, especially in Great Britain, France, and

Germany.⁴ As the European Union increased in scope and influence in the world economy, so too has the Muslim population increased within its borders. Previously uninterested nations have now “begged” for admittance into the EU, the greatest of these being Turkey, a predominantly Islamic nation. Such applications for admission have prompted the question, What constitutes Europe? Can Turkey possibly embrace European interests, or would it remain a pro-Islamic country (which has incidentally proven to be a chief concern in an age of ever-increasing divisions between the western world and Islamofascism)? What once was probably an external concern for west Europeans is now at the forefront of European politics. Regardless of what happens with Turkey’s admittance into the EU, there still exists in Europe a sizeable population of Muslims which cannot go unnoticed and which has already begun to fundamentally alter the traditional European culture. As one historian wrote, “What matters today is no longer to know what the *place* of Muslims in Europe is or will be. The question that must be addressed now is to know how they will *contribute* to the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual development of their respective societies.”⁵

The history of Islamic expansion in western Europe reveals that this contribution is on par with the fundamental social changes that Protestantism brought to Early Modern society. Social tensions between Muslims and their non-Muslim European counterparts were disastrous for Europe’s ethnic unity. Social change has been reconfigured permanently with the rise of western Islam; whether Europe can revert to its traditional culture remains to be seen.

The largest immigrant populations in post-War Great Britain, as in other west European countries, came from South Asia and Africa. The 1991 census counted over 1.1 million Muslims in Britain, revealing a dramatic increase in Muslim immigrants in the latter half of the 20th century. The first mosque in England appeared in 1889, but post-War immigration led to an increase from five mosques in 1966 to over 450 in 1990. Unlike other west European states, more Muslims in Britain practice their religion actively regardless of where these immigrants originated.⁶ After the passage of the 1988 Education Reform Act, Christian assembly and religious education were reintroduced into British public schools. Though Muslim parents were obliged to write the schools if they wished their children not to participate in such gatherings, the British

government allowed Muslim organizations to establish schools apart from the public system. Fifteen such schools were established quickly that year.⁷

Demographic transitions in Britain sparked post-War rhetoric from Parliament whose strains can be heard in the European Union. Lawmakers lamented the possibility of their land becoming too similar to the disastrous ethnic melting pot the United States was. The thoughts expressed by Enoch Powell in the mid-twentieth century have continued in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe. “As I look ahead,” he said in a speech before British Parliament, “I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’” Powell feared that the influx of immigrants would bring untold ethnic conflicts to the nation, and with the American Civil War in mind he urged Parliament to protect Britain from the “tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic[.]”⁸ The nearly 2 million Muslims in Britain may contribute to an immigration movement Powell feared, but the immigration situation there has yet to reach the dire proportions he imagined. Nevertheless, British society witnessed impressive growth in the number of Muslim immigrants before the century’s end.

The origin of immigrants to France influenced the larger populations of French Muslims at the end of the twentieth century. Islam became the second largest religion in France by the mid-1980s, accounting for the largest population of Muslims in any west European country.⁹ A rise in secularization in postmodern France contributed to a lower rate of practicing Muslims, however. Probably the strongest factor in this trend was the French custom of expecting immigrants to adopt the host culture. Critics argued that the French model was sterner than other west European nations and that their insistence that Muslims adopt French culture came out of their more conservative policies, a controversy for the greater European community given the EU’s more liberal bent in its contemporary politics.¹⁰ Regardless of the French government’s past policies, throughout the 1980s and 1990s a downward trend of practicing Muslims in France was visible in spite of a substantial growth rate of Arab immigrants.¹¹ Muslim expansion in France, by some measurements, was the most drastic in Europe, and French officials soon realized that their treatment of Islamic culture set the standard for the rest of the EU.¹²

Following the collapse of the great European empires after World War I, many eastern European immigrants suddenly became minorities in recently developed nations. Those originally in Europe from the Ottoman expansion and Mongol invasions migrated further west, settling mainly in Germany.¹³ More Muslims resulted from a fresh strain of converts coming from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Greece during the interbellum years. By the mid-1990s, 1.7 million Muslims were living in Germany, and like France, fewer of these practiced Islam regularly. About 30 per cent of the German Muslim population practiced Islam with any level of activity, and about half were reportedly indifferent to the faith.¹⁴ Social pressures in France and Germany reduced the activity of Muslims in western Europe, but tensions and demographic change still resulted. One demographer noted, “In virtually every state in which Muslims live, they have a birth rate higher than that of the surrounding population, and, consequently, a younger age structure.”¹⁵ Especially before World War II, Muslim minorities clustered in industrialized areas which had lower rates of urbanization, thus expanding the overall urban populations of western Europe. After the War, immigrants settled seldom in rural areas, thus taxing the urban infrastructure more than in pre-War times, especially in Germany and the Netherlands.¹⁶

Demographically, the higher birth rates and younger age structure created a Muslim diaspora in western Europe distinct from its neighbors. As Europeans grappled with immigration and social issues similar to contemporary Americans’ dealings with illegal immigration and their large Hispanic diaspora, they questioned this population of Muslims for its European integrity. The expression “Islamophobia” came into wide use, enough for social commentators and historians to proffer a more politically correct paradigm. Viewing the Islamization of Europe as a part of *dar al-Islam* is “neither a polemic nor is it a panic. . . . This is a realistic perspective based on the demographic growth of the Muslim diaspora community.”¹⁷ The permanence of European Muslims is now a reality, a fact. As much as Europeans may want to translate this demographic reality into a threat of Europe Islamizing into a Euro–Arab axis, they cannot rid themselves of millions of EU immigrants and citizens. Some contend that the greater fear ought to be the general European population’s decline in recent decades, not the Islamization of Europe.¹⁸

Throughout Muslim expansion, most of the new immigrants were torn between two cultures. Sociologist Zehra Onder noted in her studies of post-War European immigrants that the “circumstances of being torn between two cultures” was most often “a severe problem for Islamic families.”¹⁹ As she studied German Muslims in particular, Onder found that families from Muslim and European cultures struggled to maintain a common value-norm system. For Muslims, the system was reversed; what was right was wrong and good was bad. The “new social environment turns all this upside down through another value-norm system. As time elapses, a great conflict grows that can in no way be managed.”²⁰ Muslim families tried often to perpetuate traditions from former generations, only to instill a dilemma in the children’s lives once they interacted socially with their European counterparts.²¹

French postmodern society increased in its overtly sexual norms consistently through the later twentieth century, conflicting directly with the Muslim expectation that girls marry as virgins.²² Social norms of dress for Muslims were affected by the changes in fashion; Muslim women were to cover their whole bodies regardless of the growing trend of French women to be more revealing in their appearance. Scantly clad twenty-somethings in France were so prevalent in the 1990s that Muslims in traditional attire were noticed easily. Dress and food norms distinguished Islamic culture from their European society, but had less of an impact than language.²³ The most important basis for the development of political ethnicity was a unique and foreign language, and western Muslims brought their Arabic vernacular with them, if not the language itself.²⁴ Europe’s already disparate linguistic composition might have been diverse enough to allow for another Indo-European language to enter the foray, but Arabic’s linguistic distinctiveness introduced some confusions in communicating with Muslims. While Europeans claim no official language, though English and French have been the standards for the EU, they wrestled with accepting Arabic. For instance, questions about what language to use in schools surfaced throughout Britain and France, and the French insisted on their previous system, though they gave more explicit sanction to the building of mosques.

Though language was a challenging facet of increased Muslim immigration, the far greater impact on society was religion. Muslims held consistently to Islamic tradition and theology while adjusting to other various

social norms. Many Muslims adopted the common language before embracing any non-Islamic religion or worldview.²⁵ Such a strong hold to their religion made many Muslims reticent to accepting secular law. Religious law for many near-eastern Muslims was the only law and recognizing a state judicial system remained foreign for many of them.²⁶ Religious tensions in Europe were permanent features of its history; debacles between church and state through the Middle Ages, crusades against Islam after the eleventh century, and the Reformation exposed deeply rooted religious anxiety for European society through the centuries. Wars broke out along religious lines through the Reformation and permanently fractured the religious composition of Europe. The aftermath of Protestant victories reversed many roles in society, including family and work-related positions. One axiom of post-Reformation Europe was that religious tension was never completely resolved, and probably could not have been resolved given other circumstances by the various groups co-existing in the same continent. Throughout Muslim expansion, individuals from both sides took actions to deal with the tensions; actions which exacerbated the rift and fundamentally altered the religious landscape of Europe.

The most radical actions taken by European governments to deal with Islamic peoples were in the Western Thrace of Greece. Muslims there could not purchase real estate and previous holdings could be sold only to Christians. They were prohibited from constructing or expanding buildings. Obtaining loans was a virtual impossibility and obtaining and renewing driving licenses was challenging. When the public interest was to confiscate lands belonging to Muslims, often little compensation was rendered compared to other national public works projects. Never was a Muslim allowed to pursue public office or serve in a public service position or job. Though west European nations did not hinder Muslim participation in society to this degree, they involved themselves in addressing politically Muslim expansion with similar intensity.²⁷

In an effort to maintain political correctness, France removed itself from following suit, and as a result swung the pendulum the other direction. Some critics cited French officials with practicing reverse discrimination, saying that they handed out to many favors to Muslims and too little to the average European. By allowing public schools to be established with Arabic as the

primary language, the French government opened a squabble in its society debating the separation of church and state.²⁸ Strict constitutional laws mandated that the French government could not give favor to any one religion. Many viewed France as having crossed the line of its own constitution in placating the growing Muslim population. “Yes, there’s discrimination,” one critic wrote, “but European Muslims suffer less from politicians’ prejudices than from politicians’ accommodation and appeasement.”²⁹

Britain was also accused of reverse discrimination for its treatment of “treasonous” Muslims who organized themselves to put down Europe’s involvement in the Gulf War. In 1991, shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Supreme Council of British Muslims formed and issued a unanimous declaration:

The muslim community in the United Kingdom is outraged at this savage, destructive war being waged by the United States, Britain and their allies against the Muslims of Iraq. We totally condemn this aggression. It must stop immediately in order to end further destruction of Muslims, their resources and land.³⁰

Some young British Muslims declared in television interviews that they would fight for Saddam Hussein. Even so, government interventions were delayed to the chagrin of some anti-Muslim Europeans. British vigilantes took measures against the Supreme Council of British Muslims with violence, and only then did the British government crack down on the attacks on both sides.³¹ Freedom of speech, in large measure, was honored at this time in Britain, earning the contempt of some who argued that this was a demonstration of reverse discrimination.

Most European governmental action dealt with Muslim expansion by requiring more secularized social practices. Across Europe, Muslims faced pressure to eat pork in government restaurants and in military service. Though west European nations avoided imposing dietary regulations on minorities, some did oblige Muslim children to participate in standardized school dinners which paid little attention to Muslim tradition.³² Dress standards and language requirements were also enforced throughout Europe, especially for government employees and military personnel, usually emphasizing the growing secularization of these social elements.

Several social changes occurred within European Muslim communities throughout the twentieth century. A significant bias surfaced among Muslim families against women, especially young girls due to the economic pressure to earn money. Fatma Kurt, a young Muslim woman who cared for her eight siblings, explained that the parents “take little care of their children. They are mainly interested in making money in order to return home sooner.”³³ Sons were invariably the favorites in the family because of their social standing in European society. Job opportunities were apparently more prevalent for young men and the social burdens to provide for typically large Muslim families contributed to these families ignoring their daughters. Many Muslim girls died simply from neglect; sons were taken to the doctor when ill, but the daughters were left to their own fate. If God wished, the girl would recover without medical help anyway.³⁴

Muslim fathers also dominated their families more forcefully. Though traditionally the father had the authority in the family to discipline and make all decisions, he exercised more pressure on the family in an attempt to compensate for his lack of confidence in foreign surroundings. They saw European society as immoral and believed it was the duty of the father to protect children (especially the daughters) from the taints of secularized society.³⁵

Muslim women remained isolated in consequence of the fathers’ long work hours and the lack of interaction with their neighbors. Ordinary social contracts were incredibly superficial for these women, and the most private matters were never shared with non-Muslims. Muslim children followed suit, remaining isolated especially at schools. The bias against the women in these families and the male dominance of the fathers created a highly fused family structure between the mother and children that introduced social distance between Muslims and non-immigrant Europeans.³⁶

Social experiences among these Muslim families also had their effects on European neighbors. Religiously, Muslims remained separatist, coalescing in their own neighborhoods and keeping out of secular society as much as possible. The Muslims who behaved otherwise decreased invariably their devotion to Islam and abandoned their near-eastern traditions. Active Muslim families adopted such a fused structure that religious alienation mutually developed; Muslims wanted a place in European society but apart from it,

while Europeans left Muslims to their “ghettos” and guessed how they might become a threat. In some moments, these social interactions erupted into violence, and Europeans’ speculations of increased future conflict intensified the campaign against Muslim-Europeans.

Great Britain tightened its stance on Muslims during the Gulf War. Up and down the country, mosques came under attack, some were burned and others were graffitied and vandalized. British police made more arrests of pro-Iraqis as the press launched a concerted campaign against Muslim immigrants, and suspicions of treason intensified. After the Gulf War attacks upon immigrants continued; between 1989 and 1994 the annual number of these incidents rose from 4,383 to 9,762.³⁷

Racial violence in France was prevalent in the nation throughout the twentieth century. Following the murder of a bus driver by a mentally disturbed Arab, widespread attacks plagued France. Machine gun fire and bombings hit cafés and hotels, resulting in the death or serious injury of dozens. Between 1986 and 1991 about 20 Muslim immigrants or their children were murdered.³⁸ France experienced further religious intensification as the new Catholic pope expressed blatant disapproval of Islam. Pope John Paul II sought rapprochement with Islam previously, working with its community as an ally against the onslaught of secularism and post-Enlightenment thinking. During his pontificate the Vatican teamed up with Islamic governments at international human rights conferences to thwart European policies for birth control, abortion, and other modernist evils. Benedict XVI, however, within his first years as John Paul’s successor spoke out against Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism by referencing previous popes whose remarks were markedly against Islam in his speeches on world peace. Religiously, the French had more of a predicament in these matters due to their already higher number of Muslim communities and predominantly Catholic population.³⁹ Tensions along religious lines only increased in France and have continued into the present as a result.⁴⁰

In Germany, more blatant anti-Muslim feelings were noticeable in the society, especially after deliberate efforts to suppress neo-Nazism by the German government. One Muslim immigrant explained, “In Turkey we are the *Almanci* [those coming from Germany] and in Germany ‘the damned foreigners.’ I don’t know where I belong.”⁴¹ Socially, Germans were more strict

on their expectations that children excel in school, and young Muslims found it difficult to be at ease in school. Aggressiveness between Germans and Turks in schools were common in primary schools and many German students expressed racism on the playground. “I know the value which I have in the eyes of the Germans,” Temel Kurt, a child from Duisberg-Bruckhausen said regarding his combative classmates.⁴² Assessments revealed that Muslim children in Germany were less interested in learning, had higher rates of autism, and were more aggressive in their retaliations than the average German student. Scholars noted that “prejudices against the foreign children do them much harm.” Spiritual stress and conflicts followed, and these children “feel overwhelmed and view school as a burden and as an obligation.”⁴³

Probably the most violent conflict in the Netherlands over social adaptations to Muslim immigration spawned from the murder of a Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh in 2004. Van Gogh had been bicycling to work when Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch-born son of Moroccan immigrants and a member of a radical Muslim network, shot him, knocking him off the bicycle. Bouyeri pummeled van Gogh’s body with over twenty rounds and even stabbed him several times. With the knife, Bouyeri then pinned a five-page manifesto into van Gogh’s chest, promising the end of the Dutch government. “I know definitely that you, O America, will go down. I know definitely that you, O Europe will go down. I know definitely that you, O Netherlands, will go down,” the statement asserted.⁴⁴ Bouyeri’s attack came out of retaliation for van Gogh’s work on anti-Islamic films.

Social fears skyrocketed in the Netherlands. Journalists reported that the attack “and its aftermath have fed a widespread sentiment that the Dutch have been too soft for too long.”⁴⁵ By sticking to a more politically correct stance, the Dutch government effectively allowed for radical Islamicism to surface. Other Europeans pressed the EU to take action or to at least condemn Islamofascism, but in the wake of the Iraq War and the EU’s general disapproval of America’s occupation in Iraq, both the Netherlands and the EU made little comment about the van Gogh assassination. Ayham Tonca, a forty-year-old Turkish immigrant leader in the Netherlands expressed the fear Dutch Muslims had for the potential retaliation their European neighbors might inflict on them. “There is great fear of Islam in Holland,” he told

journalists. “But on the other side, the Muslim community is also afraid. You have two groups who are afraid and who don’t speak to each other. And that’s not good for the society.”⁴⁶

Like Tonca, other European Muslims have called for a truce between Muslims and Europeans in the coming years. In 2005, a leading Muslim went to the extreme, writing that the benefits from a Eurabian axis would outweigh the current cultural strife in the continent and that such an alliance between Europe and the Middle East is imminent. As the U.S. continues its engagement against terrorism, and consequently on radical Muslims, European and non-European Muslims will form a common enemy thus furthering the political ties of the two groups. The war on western culture will develop within Europe and the religious atmosphere will break down secularism as Muslims continue to increase in size there. Given the rise of the EU, this scholar predicts the breakdown of Euro-American relations and the polarization of the two leading consumer markets; a Eurabian axis could then form, and would be of interest to Europeans to protect against the all-out expansion of Islam.⁴⁷

Whether or not such a European–Arabian axis will form, the evidence that Europe has yet to overcome the social tensions of the twentieth century abounds. Like the Protestant Reformation, a fusion of the two religious communities is unlikely; the strife was too political and too real to be managed with policy alone. Merely letting the two communities co-exist, like other epochs in European society, will probably only increase the tensions in Europe. The secularization of Europe only contributed to the religious tensions of the twentieth century in western Europe, and was more of a cause for ethnic troubles than the actual teachings of Islam and the general attitude of Europeans toward Muslims. In fact, the “tragic and intractable phenomenon” of which Enoch Powell was so concerned, was more this secularization than Islam or immigration, and Europe permanently will have to assess whether or not it will continue to fight religion or allow it in its society.

¹ Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 1.

² Panikos Panayi, *An Ethnic History of Europe Since 1945: Nations, States and Minorities* (Essex, England: Pearson Education, 2000), 103.

³ Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2002). The whole book asserts this thesis and argues for a contemporary definition of Europe centered on these characteristics.

⁴ Nielsen, 1.

⁵ Tariq Ramadan, "Europeanization of Islam or Islamization of Europe?" *Islam, Europe's Second Religion: The New Social, Cultural, and Political Landscape*, Shirleen T. Hunter, ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 214.

⁶ Panayi, 132.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Enoch Powell, "Bringing the Immigration Issue to the Center of Politics," *Sources of Twentieth-Century Europe*, Marvin Perry, et al., eds. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 417–18.

⁹ Panayi, 133.

¹⁰ Sebastian Rotella, "Extremist Threats Put Netherlands in Turmoil," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2004.

¹¹ Panayi, 132–33.

¹² Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam Is Destroying the West from Within* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 52.

¹³ Panayi, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam versus Global Jihad* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 188.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Bat Ye'or, *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab Axis* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 243.

¹⁹ Zehra Onder, "Muslim-Turkish Children in Germany: Sociocultural Problems," *Sources of Twentieth-Century Europe*, Marvin Perry, et al., eds. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 418–19.

²⁰ Ibid., 420.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Panayi, 108.

²³ Ibid., 102.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 103.

²⁶ Bawer, 52.

²⁷ Panayi, 67.

²⁸ Ibid., 133.

²⁹ Bawer, 52.

³⁰ Panayi, 153.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 109.

³³ Onder, 419.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 421.

³⁶ Ibid., 420–21.

³⁷ Panayi, 240.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Bawer, 217–18.

⁴⁰ Ian Fisher and Sabrina Tavernise, "Pope Backs Turkey's Bid to Join European Union," *New York Times*, November 29, 2006; Richard Owen, "Pope Gives Blessing to Turkey's EU Campaign," *Times* (London), November 29, 2006; Mark Tran, "Turkey Claims EU Bid Gets Pope's Blessing," *Guardian* (Manchester), November 28, 2006.

⁴¹ Onder, 419.

⁴² Ibid., 420.

⁴³ Ibid., 419–20.

⁴⁴ Bawer, 1–3.

⁴⁵ Rotella, November 22, 2004.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ye'or, 243–261; 131.