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## Interreligious Dialogue and Muslim Migration

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# Interreligious Dialogue<sup>1</sup> and Muslim Migration to Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

Islam and Muslims have been present in Europe for a very long time, and many Muslims today are of European origin, some of them European converts (or *reverts* as they are called in Islam) but many are second or third generation immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, it is true to say that, until very recently, Islam and Muslims seemed to have very little impact on European society and public life; this is even truer in Ireland than in many parts of mainland Europe. Until maybe just ten years ago, in Falcarragh, my home village in Ireland, I doubt anyone was even aware of the presence of Islam in the country! However, today it is clear that Islam is part of Europe's demographic and cultural landscape and Muslims are not just here as guests but they are Europeans of Muslim faith who will remain a permanent part of Europe's social and political fabric.

Unfortunately, questions on the relationship of Islam and Muslims to and in Europe tend to focus on mutual fears rather than on benefits that both parties can derive from this situation.<sup>3</sup>

For missionary congregations, founded many years ago in Europe to proclaim the Good News of God's Reign of Peace and Communion to non-Christian peoples and nations, this situation in Europe undoubtedly presents a great challenge today. It is this challenge which we explore in this paper.

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1 This is a shortened version of the article published in SMA Bulletin 150, *Mission, Migration and the Ministry of Exorcism*, 2018, 63 – 81 (available at Amazon).

2 A good presentation is given of the historical as well as contemporary presence of Muslims in a number of different European countries in Shirin T. Hunter (ed.), *Islam, Europe's Second Religion: The New Social, Cultural and Political Landscape*, Praeger, 2002.

3 Tariq Ramadan, 'Europeanization of Islam or Islamization of Europe' in Hunter ed., (2002), 207 – 218.

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## INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND MUSLIM MIGRATION

### MUSLIM PRESENCE IN EUROPE

Muslim scholars such as Tamim Ansary<sup>4</sup> appeal for a fuller understanding of how Islam and the world at large have shaped each other. While not going into a history lesson of Europe, or the Crusades, or Spain, or Italy, or the Ottoman empire, it is good in this paper to simply acknowledge that Islam has had a very great influence on the development of not only the world but also of Europe, and the history of Europe needs to give greater acknowledgement to the presence and influence of Islam and of Muslims on the formation of western, secular and modern rational thought.

Today, Islam is widely considered Europe's fastest growing religion, and therefore Europe's second religion, with immigration and above average birth rates leading to a rapid increase in the Muslim population. The exact number of Muslims is difficult to establish, as census figures are often questioned and many countries choose not to compile such information.

The Muslim presence in Europe is often the subject of intense discussion and political campaigns. Many books are written with provocative titles suggesting that Islam and the West (Europe) are quite opposite and incompatible.<sup>5</sup> Events such as the cartoons affairs in Denmark and in France, and of course the many terrorist attacks by or in the name of self-proclaimed Islamic militant groups such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS have fueled ongoing support for populist right-wing parties that view Muslims as a threat to European values, culture and ways of life.

We hear of local communities in Ireland and other European countries, where the suggestion of building a mosque, or even giving the Muslim community a place to gather and pray, is a cause for concern. As we have seen in recent national elections, in the UK, France and Germany for instance, immigration – and particularly Muslim immigration – were top issues.

The truth is that Muslims in Europe, as worldwide and indeed as with any category of human beings, are not one homogenous group. Neither do they form one united community or speak with one voice. There are of course Shiites and there are Sunnis. There are practising Muslims and others who don't. There are some who insist on strict codes of life and others who are much more lax. There are all kinds of perspectives and voices. There are people from a great variety of countries, cultures and social backgrounds.

How can Europe best accommodate and naturalize Islam,

4 Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*, Public Affairs, New York, 2009.

5 Samuel Huntington's thesis on the Clash of Civilizations between the West and Islam is well known and has contributed to the exaggerated uniqueness of identity attributed to Europe (the West) and to Islam.

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how can a Muslim become 'European' without ceasing to be Muslim, how can the rise of racist and xenophobic and anti-Islamic sentiments and political parties be limited, and finally, how can cooperative and constructive relations between Muslim and indigenous European, traditionally Christian and increasingly secular, societies be established?

### SOME SPECIFIC CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY THE EUROPEAN-MUSLIM RELATION TODAY

#### 1. Islamophobia

While research notes that there are a great many Muslim men and women living in Europe who have never experienced any hostility or discrimination, research also shows that anti-Muslim Racism, commonly known as Islamophobia, does loom over all of Europe today and indicates that this phenomenon is increasing rather than decreasing.<sup>6</sup> Many Muslims speak of being perceived and judged not for themselves but for the actions of others who they never met and over whom they had no control.

Anti-Muslim racism is experienced in a great variety of ways, ranging from verbal abuse to physical abuse to discrimination of various kinds.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for this anti-Muslim racism, or Islamophobia, are many, just as reasons can be given to justify any form of racism. This of course does not make it justifiable.

#### 2. Anti-Muslim Laws

Today, we see laws being proposed and introduced in quite a few European countries in the name of liberalism or human rights, but they could equally be seen to be an overt form of anti-Muslim racism.

Recently we have seen the debate sparked in Iceland over the proposal to ban male circumcision which is seen as a denial of a basic religious right of Muslims as well as of Jews. Even in Ireland recently we had a very loud debate within the Muslim communities about the issue of female genital mutilation and whether or not this should be allowed.

The debate about women's dress and whether or not the hijab should be allowed, takes centre stage in many public discussions on Islam and Muslims, and is unfortunately often used and abused in the game of identity politics. Of course, it needs to be said that the issue of women's dress, whether women's head should be

6 Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*, Verso, London 2014.

7 James Carr, *Experiences of Anti-Muslim Racism in Ireland*, Study for the Irish Research Council, June 2014. Available Online at <https://ulsites.ul.ie/hhrg/sites/default/files/Experiences%20of%20Anti-Muslim%20Racism%20in%20Ireland.pdf>. Accessed 23rd February 2018.

covered or not, a veil or not a veil, trousers or a skirt, or how long or short the skirt or the neck line should be, has always been a great topic for men to discuss, both in the Catholic church as in so many other religious and cultural communities.

Another thorny issue is that of the right to freedom of speech, which is considered very much a European value, and the need to put a stop to the phenomenon of what can only be described as inflammatory Hate Speech. Does freedom of speech mean that all public insults and senses of humour and even prejudices must be tolerated no matter how insulting or exclusive or insensitive they may be?

### 3. Radical Islam

Because so many forms of Islam can be put under the bracket 'Radical' many simplistic judgements are made and wrongful stereotypes and prejudices fueled and it is innocent Muslims who suffer the consequences.

Radical Islam is basically a set of ideologies which hold that Islam should guide not only personal life, but also social and political life, life from its root and in all its spheres. Most Muslims, who are peace loving as are most human beings, would consider themselves radical in that they wish Islam to direct their life in all spheres and they desire to adhere to it faithfully. The term Radical Islam is also used to refer to Fundamentalist Islam. Again, like radical, the word fundamentalist comes from the fundamentals, the basic foundational pillars. To be a good Catholic, a good priest or Religious today, we say we must be radical, we must be prophetic, we must be faithful to the basic principles of our faith, and we must be counter-cultural! In this same vein, many Muslims desire to be 'radical' and faithful to the 'fundamentals' and this can mean strict dress codes and other strict religious rules.

However, when most of us today speak of Radical Islam, we have in mind those so-called Islamic movements or Muslim individuals, who in the name of Islam, interpret the fundamentals of their faith so narrowly that they see themselves as the only ones following Islam the right way, and they interpret jihad as a violent struggle in the name of God against all that is not in accordance with their interpretation of Islam and their world view. Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite, suffer with the ideologies and beliefs and practices of these jihadist radical individuals and groups and within both denominations these ideologies can and have grown.

Many of the attacks that happen in Europe are carried out by young people, some of them of European origin and others who are immigrants. Equally, so many young people from Europe, including from Ireland, have gone to join ISIS. An obvious

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question to ask is why this is the case, what attracts these young people to abandon their lives in a free democratic society to join such seemingly narrow-minded vicious groups.

Largely it would seem to be the promise of helping to build a utopian world, a world where there is belonging and meaning and a concrete guide of what is right and wrong, unlike the world offered in the West today. There are indeed many dissatisfied young people in today's fast moving Europe, immigrant youth even more so, who experience a deep sense of cultural dissonance created by feelings of alienation; many feel unable to compete and thus exclude themselves from public life through drugs, school drop-out, and so on. Religious ideology is used to induce recruits to see the value of a life of martyrdom for a cause greater than what today's western society offers; and of course there is also the promise of a life of happiness and fulfillment in the hereafter. These teachings and messages are delivered by radical preachers in mosques and in Muslim communities, or even in universities and other places where young people gather, and of course the propagators of these teachings use the social media with great effect.

It is within the Muslim communities themselves that the spread of such radical Islam needs to be fought but it is not their responsibility alone. Muslims must continue to condemn and disassociate themselves from the acts of terrorists and must continue to proactively challenge the spectrum of extremism through education, engagement and the empowerment of vulnerable young people. Where ISIS offers something to die for, Muslims and non-Muslims together must offer young people of all faiths something to live for.

### 4. Demands made by Muslim Communities in Europe

When Muslims come to a country first, their immediate concerns are housing, work, language. As Muslim families grow and communities develop, it is only natural that they begin to make more demands: places for prayer, mosques, places for religious instruction and social interaction. Then they often encounter obstacles from neighbours and local communities for various reasons but often because there is the fear or suspicion that the mosques or centres will be used to support fundamentalist or radical Islamists. In some countries the demand to be able to obtain *hallâl* meat is met with concern from civil authorities that the method used is barbaric.

The field of education can be most problematic, with Muslim parents wanting their children to be schooled in an educational environment that is respectful towards religion and teaches moral values. Responses from authorities toward these demands differ from one country to another but for the most part efforts are made

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to dialogue and reach a consensus. Obviously this is not always found. In many parts of Europe, especially in Ireland, there is reason to believe that more concessions are made to accommodate Muslims and the Islamic faith than are made towards Christianity; indeed, efforts to abolish any trace of Catholic influence in schools are being continuously increased.

### 5. Is a European Islam possible?

The question today is can Western European countries really accommodate Islam so that Muslims can feel so at home in Europe that it is natural for them to be Muslim, and European societies and policies are as much influenced by Islam as they are by any other religion or philosophy?

Muslim communities in Europe, indeed even in a small country like Ireland, are very fragmented, with ethnic, ideological, social and many other differences and divisions, with many different and even rivalling Islamic organizations and centres. Many rely on Islamic countries for funds and therefore are quite dependent on them and must toe their line. This causes them to be able to remain isolated both from other Muslim groups and from the European society.

Some people are sceptical about the possibility of accommodating Muslims and Islam in Europe as they believe that Islam cannot live in a minority situation. Some fear that since Islam is a missionary religion Muslims will see Europe as immoral and degenerate with a lost sense of God and in need of Islam to save it. Undoubtedly there are Muslims in Europe, and Islamic centres, who believe that and who are on an all-out mission to propagate Islam and seek conversions. In the wise words of Michael Fitzgerald: "There is no reason to be alarmist and to assume that all Muslims entertain a project of this sort, but it is not wise, on the other hand, to ignore it."<sup>8</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SINCERE AND CONCRETE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The above realities, with these difficulties and challenges, of the European-Muslim relationship today speak loudly of the need for DIALOGUE, especially interfaith dialogue, so that we can all grow in mutual knowledge and understanding and can learn to coexist as people of different faiths. To do something constructive about this is a missionary imperative.

An important question of course is: are Muslims in Europe open to dialogue or is it only Christians and Europeans of other faiths or

8 Michael Fitzgerald, *Christians and Muslims in Europe: Perspectives for Dialogue*, Sedos. Available online at <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/fitzgerald.html>

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none who think dialogue is necessary and are willing to participate in it with sincerity?

This is best answered by giving a few concrete examples of dialogue that is already taking place. On an official level, in nearly every country in Europe as well as at European level there are interfaith organizations in which some Muslims are actively engaged: The Three Faiths Forum established originally in Britain and now also active in Ireland (Dublin and Cork); The World Conference on Religion and Peace; the Interfaith Network in Britain. The Building Bridges seminars and the Common Word activities, held annually. In Ireland, there is the Dublin City Interfaith Forum, and the Sisters of Faith for Peace as well as others. These organizations all contribute whether on a greater or smaller level to building bridges across the religious divide, to helping people see one another as human beings, individuals with multi-faceted identities and not just a static religious identity.

In terms of political dialogue, a lot of high level 'dialogue' sessions are held to look at the issue of integration of Muslims and Islam in Europe. The European Parliament has adopted numerous resolutions in defense of the principles of freedom of religion and belief as well as religious pluralism and tolerance, and stressed the importance of constant dialogue among, and with, religious as well as non-confessional and philosophical communities.

The Council of European Bishops Conference (CCEE) set up a Commission for Dialogue (Relations) with Muslims in Europe and this has already, since 2009, had five meetings, its fifth just held in February 2018 in Albania. Whether or not these Commissions and their meetings have any effect depends on each Bishop or National delegate stepping down through the Church in his home country whatever may have been discussed. I admit that in Ireland I have never heard any mention of any such step-down.

Dialogue and bridge building at the level of education is indeed very valuable and many use this platform to find ways of integrating Islam in a more serious way in the contemporary European culture. In every university, and indeed in many schools, in Europe there is a big number of Muslim students, and in most are to be found established strong Muslim associations. Many universities also have institutes or centres for Muslim-Christian dialogue, such as the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in DCU (Dublin City University). The role of these centres in helping to build good relations between Muslims and people of other faiths in Europe today, as well as to find ways to naturalize Islam in Europe and to build relations between Muslim and indigenous European societies cannot be overemphasized.

Other levels of encounter could be referred to. Certainly a lot of



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Muslim-European dialogue happens through the initiative of other social networks such as intercultural groups or even sport clubs including the GAA in Ireland, and of course in the work place and other public spaces. This may not be interfaith per se, since it is not necessarily an encounter of faiths or at the level of faiths, but it is still very important in enabling friendship, understanding and integration.

Mixed-marriage is of course a means for serious interfaith dialogue. This is something not necessarily to be encouraged because of the many difficulties involved, but at the same time it is not to be discouraged; rather, any couple planning to marry needs to be closely accompanied and guided. Some very helpful materials have been provided for this by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Families formed of mixed marriages are indeed an important block, maybe even foundation stone, for an interreligious society.

### CONCLUSION

*‘Dialogue in Truth and Charity: Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue,’* was the theme of the tenth Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue held in Rome from 4 to 7 June 2008. Here we are told that, “In our time, dialogue can be understood in many ways. At the purely human level, it is reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion”.

Undoubtedly, any interfaith dialogue can only hope to be effective if it is sincere, if it is from the heart, if it does seek real interpersonal communion. It begins with my seeing the other as a human being and wishing for the other the respect, peace and fulfilment which I wish for myself. In *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* we are told that, ‘dialogue is also understood as an attitude of respect and friendship which permeates or should permeate all those activities constituting [the Church’s] evangelizing mission in the world’. ‘In order to realize sincere and fruitful dialogue among people of different religions, “it is fundamental that there be reciprocal respect, not only theoretical but also practical, in recognition of the inherent dignity of the dialogue partners and, in particular, their religious freedom”’.

The list of how we can be involved in dialogue, and thus help to improve Muslim-Christian relations in Europe, is endless; it requires only our interest and commitment. It requires our appreciation of dialogue as an essential part of our being Christian and our being missionary, an openness to contemplating God outside our camp, a readiness to meet Muslims on a human

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level, form genuine friendships, share important moments of life together, and basically assume our responsibility as Christians to be for others and work with others for God's Reign of Communion which we proclaim and seek.

This will require from us forgiveness, humility, openness, courage. It is not necessarily easy; it demands a spirituality of dialogue which only God's grace can give. We, who are called to mission *ad gentes* and entrusted with the charism to go *ad extra*, beyond those frontiers of fear and prejudice which others do not want to cross, pray to be given that grace.

**Learning from the example of others.** All the energies of the Church should be channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. Christians must regard the lapsed and unbelieving with the utmost compassion while, at the same time, reaching out to them at every opportunity. Every parish and diocese must cultivate a sense of mission, a sense of responsibility for the spread of the Gospel. Father Peyton's sense of mission led him to make a total commitment to his work, pursuing his goal with a holy passion. His remarkable courage and zeal should help inspire and motivate modern day workers in the vineyard, to go forth to preach the Gospel without hesitation, reluctance or fear.

—TOM MULLIGAN, *The Rosary Priest*, (Dublin: Veritas) 2018.  
p. 185.