

WILL ISLAMOPHOBIA BRING AN END TO THE MULTICULTURALISM?

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***Abstract:** Having started after WWII, the immigration of foreigners into Europe started challenging the homogeneity of the European states. The predominantly Christian European countries became tempted by the values of Islam, the religion brought by immigrants. In order to facilitate the accommodation and adaptation of the newcomers, different European countries adopted different approaches to this challenge to the respective national identities.*

The concept of multiculturalism, as a possible solution to the peaceful coexistence of different cultures, became particularly popular in the last two decades. However, the concept itself has been challenged by the growing racism and xenophobia in Europe. As the most visible manifestation of these sentiments toward immigrants is islamophobia. Many factors contributed to the rise of this phenomenon in Europe, among them the migration, terrorist attacks on European soil in the new millennium and the rise of the Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Those events brought to the surface different values of Islam and questioned their compatibility with principles of the secular states in Europe. The prescriptive nature of Islamic religion has brought many hardships to the liberal democracies throughout Europe.

The long debate about the compatibility of the Islamic beliefs and values with the modern and secular states continues in Europe. The rising islamophobia in Europe is threatening to bring an end to the concept of the multiculturalism. The co-existence of the Christianity and Islam in the contemporary secular and liberal states of Europe is challenged by the fear from Muslims and it remains to be seen if this phenomenon will collapse the multicultural projects in many European countries.

Keywords: Islamophobia, multiculturalism, religion, Islam.

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Introduction

The concept of multiculturalism has become an integral part of the globalization process. Different values, beliefs and traditions of the mixing cultures in the secular states are not easy to harmonize. Moreover, it looks like multiculturalism, envisioned as tolerance of the 'others' and differences in the society, is becoming a failed project. In the contemporary European states, the German chancellor Angela Merkel was among the first to express doubt in the enthusiastic visions to replace the assimilation of migrants with the concept of multiculturalism. In 2010 she declared that multiculturalism in Germany has failed and it is an illusion to think that Germans and 'Gastarbeiters' (guest workers) could live happily together (The Guardian, 2010). The next year, the French president stated that "we have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him" (The Telegraph, 2011). The same year, UK Prime Minister David Cameron in his famous speech at the Munich security conference made similar points toward accommodation of the foreigners: "To be a British citizen means to believe in the liberty of speech and religious freedom, and in democracy and equal rights, irrespective of race, sex or sexual orientation" (BBC, 2011). The mentioned European leaders and their stance toward multiculturalism were that particularly the religions, as the key determinants of the culture and the national identity in Europe, do not contribute enough toward building tolerance and co-existence among the cultures.

The racism and xenophobia in modern Europe are on the rise again. Especially the fear from Muslims is burdening contemporary societies and causes tensions. Many factors have contributed to the phenomenon of islamophobia. During the 20th century, many European countries gave independence to their colonies throughout Asia and Africa. Muslims were able to practice their religion and organize their public and private life without foreign interference, but It seems that it all started by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 when tectonic changes happened in the Muslim world. On the other hand, at the end of the last century and beginning of the new millennium, there were many terrorist attacks worldwide, including in Europe. Most of the attacks were planned and conducted by Muslims, so the general public in many European states started creating aversion toward Muslims. On the top of it, the rise of the Islamic Caliphate on the territory of Syria and Iraq in 2014, and the brutality of this terrorist Islamic organization called 'Islamic State' deepened the negative sentiment in Europe toward Muslims.

The islamophobia and this negative sentiment toward Muslims nowadays represents a real threat to the promising concept of multiculturalism. Many authors consider the 'ethnic pluralism' or the 'cultural pluralism' to be already implemented in the USA. Europe, however, is doubtful about the success of such pluralism and all those factors mentioned above have led to declining support of the multiculturalism. Migrants bringing their own traditions, culture and religion, combined with the liberal democracies in Europe and the scrutiny of the Sharia Law, leaves little space for tolerance and acceptance of the differences. This, however, goes in favor of the Huntington's theory that people's cultural

and religious identities are going to be the primary sources of conflict and the future wars would be fought not between countries, but between cultures (Huntington, 1997).

1. Root causes for Islamophobia

1.1. Islamic Revolution

In the second half of the 20th century, although Western colonial powers gave independence to many of their colonies, they were still trying to protect their interests in many Muslim countries by backing up certain rulers. Additionally, they were trying to ‘westernize’ the former colonies by trying to expose them to the western culture and way of living. Islam, on the other hand, considers the western culture as an enemy to the pure Islam (Grizhev, 2014). The Islamic religion plays a huge role in critical issues, because the religion itself is a big factor in the formation of the identity. In this context, with the Iranian Revolution or the Islamic Revolution from 1979, many things changed in the Muslim world.

The 1979 Revolution represented a series of events that resulted in the overthrow of the US-backed government of Iran, led by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. As a result of the revolution, the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini created the theocratic Islamic State of Iran.

By many experts and academics, such an event was not very likely to happen and it was difficult to see it coming. As Amuzegar states, the revolution was unusual for the surprise it created throughout the world (Amuzegar, 1991). Among many other surprises, it was awkward that pro-western monarchy was replaced by anti-western theocracy. Actually, one of the main reasons for the revolution was “the conservative backlash against the Westernizing and secularizing efforts of the Western-backed Shah” (Del Giudice, 2008).

Looking at the broader picture and from geostrategic perspective, one can say that US never forgave Iranians for this non-violent, but revolution with huge consequences, including second and third-row effects. Khomeini is considered as one of the founders of the Islamic awakening or Islamic revival, out of whom a wide variety of movements emerged as a consequence of the disappointment from the westernized ruling elites in Muslim countries. Revivalists were motivated by a desire to “restore Islam to ascendancy in a world that has turned away from God” (Brown, 1996). The revolution was one of the events that encouraged Muslims to get back to their religion and grow the sense of belonging to the international Muslim community, the Ummah. In this way, the migrants coming to Europe started creating their identity within the Islamic religion, instead of identifying with the state they migrate to.

The backside of the Islamic awakening is the rise of fundamentalist preachers and movements, as well as terrorist attacks across Europe. Those events, consequently, caused a significant distrust in the Muslims in Europe, leading to the spread of Islamophobia in the secular European countries.

1.2. Migration

Of all the contemporary challenges Europe is facing today, migration is probably the most important. As the Bulgarian political scientist Krastev claims, “of the many crises that Europe faces today, it is the migration crisis that most sharply defines the changing nature of European politics...In a world of vast inequalities and open borders, migration becomes the new form of revolution” (Krastev, 2016).

The migration wave toward Europe, culminating in 2015, was an unprecedented massive movement of refugees from conflict regions in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as economic migrants from wider regions of Asia and Africa. The massive influx of refugees has already caused demographic changes throughout Europe, and, in the long run, it will affect even more. According to Andreas Brevie, what Europe is facing at the moment is ‘demographic jihad’ (Brevie, 2011). Not very familiar with the basis of the Islamic religion, combined with the formation of prejudices toward Muslims based on media influences, terrorist attacks conducted by fundamentalist movements and organizations as well as many more factors, the ordinary European citizen sees a threat in his fellow Muslim. This fear of ‘others’, including the newcomers and migrants, does not benefit the concept of multiculturalism.

Not all the countries in Europe favor the concept of multiculturalism. There is a huge difference between the west and the east. Generally, the Western European countries have been much more liberal and fond of the multicultural co-existence. For instance, UK and Netherlands have had immigration policies based on multiculturalism. As a result of the increased immigrant influx during the 1950s and 1960s, the Netherlands became a forerunner in the adoption of the multicultural approach to integration (Prins & Saharso, 2010).

The migration wave caused another phenomenon in recent years. The period was an opportunity for the right-wing populist parties to gain voters and followers by focusing and stressing the inability of migrants to accommodate and accept the culture of their new country. In France, Netherlands and Italy the Islamophobia had the most significant rise.

An interesting case was the German approach and understanding of the multiculturalism. Living in segregated communities, Muslims were largely isolated from the broader German society. According to Asif, many Germans justified this segregation as a form of multiculturalism where immigrants were allowed to maintain their own identities (Mohiuddin, 2017).

In Sweden, an ambitious multicultural model was instituted to deal with the multiethnic questions. In 1974, the former assimilation policy was replaced by multiculturalism, aimed at granting immigrants certain inalienable rights based on three principles: equality, cooperation and freedom of choice (Runblom, 1994).

1.3. Terrorist attacks across Europe

The first terrorist attack in Europe with Islamic signs was carried out in 1995 in Paris, when a network with ties to Algeria conducted a string of bombings. The reason was

retaliation for French involvement in the Algerian Civil War. Since then, especially in the 21st century, most of the terrorist attacks in Europe had links to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). Almost all the incidents were carried out by Muslims and had a religious background. So, for ordinary Europeans, looking at those events, being surrounded by people practicing mostly unknown religions for which they create perception by watching reports on the brutality of Islamist fundamental groups and organizations, it creates fear and doubt on Muslims.

The deadliest attack on European soil in the new millennium was the Madrid train bombing in 2004, killing 193 persons. Al-Qaeda by losing its influence and power made a vacuum that was filled by the ultra-fundamental Islamic group, the IS. So, after proclaiming the Caliphate in 2014, in the next two years, Europe witnessed more people killed by Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe than in any other period. The new millennium in Europe really looks like Huntington's prediction of clash of civilizations and cultures, with religion playing the key role. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism fueled by a distorted interpretation of the Islamic religion is part of the plan of those fundamentalists and religious extremists. Actually, it is true that, at least in part, the Islamophobia is motivated on purpose by these fundamental organizations and groups. Creating perception among the general public in Europe that Islam is a violent religion, their narrative is aimed at provoking fear and intolerance toward Muslims. This way, they are able to manipulate the feelings of Muslim migrants in Europe. And this is the reason why the religious radicalization is so high on the European agenda. It is the young population that is particularly vulnerable to religious radicalization, but one cannot forget about the socially excluded. And so we come to the point when we realize that Islamophobia, partly motivated by Islamic fundamentalists, is in their favor, and it is one of the biggest obstacles to the implementation of the multiculturalism.

Another reason for worry of the European security services, trying to protect the national security, is that among all those migrants coming to Europe, there have been many religious radicals, ready to conduct terrorist activities, as we saw in the case of Brussels bombing in 2016. Additionally, the returnees and foreign fighters coming from the war zones in Syria and Iraq, represent a potential source of terrorism and threat to the security in the respective European countries.

1.4. Islamic caliphate

Following the Islamic revival of the 20th century, the peak of the activities of the fundamental Islamists was the rise of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014 by the group 'Islamic State of Iraq and Levant', later known as Islamic State and commonly addressed by its Arabic acronym, the Daesh. The group rose as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda and they are both following the strict and Salafi interpretation of Islam. The main difference is their focus: Al-Qaeda was focused globally, while IS considered that the time has come for the creation of the caliphate. In other words, IS was locally focused. In June 2014 the group proclaimed Islamic caliphate, claiming religious, political and military authority over all

Muslims worldwide. The IS became known for the videos of beheadings and other types of executions. Just as said earlier, considering the culture one of the greatest enemies of Islam, they demolished and destroyed many cultural heritage sites.

Following the establishment of the Caliphate, there was a surge of foreign fighters coming to fight for the Caliphate. According to the UN, more than 40,000 people from 110 countries have travelled to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq (UN, 2017). Producing and documenting many videos of executions, the IS was famous for its brutality, following the strict interpretation of the Islamic religion. Many authors think that the purpose of the videos, among others, was to provoke the rise of islamophobia in Europe. For the Europeans, such interpretation of the religious scripts and killing people in the name of the religion, with videos easily and widely accessible on the internet, speak enough about the tolerance of others and acceptance of the differences, as most of the Muslims claim that Islamic religion promotes. Looking at those videos, witnessing bombs, knives or vehicle attacks in their own countries, it is not easy for the European citizens to accept the widely accepted perception of the Islam as 'religion of peace'.

From the sociological perspective, it is not so difficult to understand how some of the Muslims decide to sacrifice their own life for Islam, becoming *mujahedeen*. Although all the religions play a big role in the personal identity formation, as well as national identity formation in Europe, the prescriptive nature of Islam is very different from the descriptive nature of the Christian holy book. However, from the geopolitical and geo-strategic perspective, the rise of the Islamic Caliphate made huge changes in the international relations worldwide. Besides the religious motives, politics has always played a big role in manipulating the religious feelings of the people. Parts of these Islamic fundamental groups and organizations have been supported by the global super powers in order to achieve and protect their own national interests. More often than not, politicians rarely think about the second and third-row effects of actions such as supporting jihadist and militant Islamic groups. And as it usually happens, the combination of politics and religion has brought many unwanted and unplanned effects that do not contribute to the reputation of Islam.

2. Possible co-existence of the concepts of multiculturalism and islamophobia

2.1. Memories of colonialism

Until the 20th century, most of the Muslim countries in Africa and Asia were actually colonies of some of the European countries. It means that the big portion of public life has been influenced by the western culture and values that are much different than the ones prescribed by the Quran. Even after giving independence to those countries, the west colonial powers are still trying to spread their influence and interest. In this context, we can mention the 'adventures' of the West in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya. And this is one of the core grievances of the Muslims living in those and in neighboring countries. Combined with the still fresh collective memories from the colonial periods,

and the invasive and aggressive politics of the world superpowers, the situation in contemporary Europe is such that, once again, there is a polarization, primarily based on culture and religion. According to Huntington (1997), "as the ideological division of Europe has disappeared, the cultural division of Europe between Western Christianity, on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, on the other, has re-emerged (Huntington, 1997).

As a result, there is a growing number of academics that are trying to explain that the situation Europe is facing at the moment, in respect of the growing Islamophobia and failing concept of multiculturalism, is not only caused by the Muslims and is not only caused by the religion. The former colonies, no matter if they practice Islam or any other religion, should be left alone to choose how they are to organize their society. If the democracy works in Europe, it does not mean that we can replicate it in countries with such a complex history, tradition and culture. Actually, the Islam has its own version of democracy and as Esposito explains, 'Sunni Muslims believe that Islam requires all decisions made by and for the Muslim societies to be made by *shura* of the Muslim community and believe this to be the basis for implementing representative democracy' (Esposito, 2003).

2.2. Liberalism of Europe

As mentioned earlier, in Europe, the increased tensions between national majorities and Muslim communities during the early 2000s prompted many European countries to find appropriate ways to integrate cultural, ethnic and religious diversity (Mohiuddin, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a big difference between the policies of European countries when it comes to the integration of newcomers and immigrants with different culture and religion. Some of them are pretty liberal, others are much stricter.

Traditionally two major narratives dominate the discourse on the role of religion in modern and contemporary European history, one on the secularization of Europe and the separation of church and state, and the other, much less prominent though and rather as part of a much broader discourse, on diversity and tolerance. (Pasture, 2009). Generally, one can say that western European countries are more acceptable and willing to integrate Muslims into society. However, very often the liberal approach of European countries is abused by the migrants. One of the areas where it is visible is the blurred distinction between the freedom of speech and the hate speech.

Conclusion

The process of globalization, together with the rapid technological innovation and advancement, enhanced the migration worldwide. On the one hand, this process brings many benefits to humanity, but on the other hand, it complicates the accommodation of the migrants in the new environment. It is particularly important for the European

countries, as one can clearly see from the events happening on the European soil in the first two decades of the new millennium.

Although declaring as secular states, it is important to understand that in contemporary Europe, religion and culture play an important role, when it comes to the accommodation of the newcomers. The situation can be best described if we say that the migrants, vast majority of them Muslims, identify themselves in the new environment as part of the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) instead of trying to adapt to the new society. It is understandable, if we take into consideration the fact that the religion and the culture they have practiced is very different from the one they are introduced to.

Islam is very often described as 'religion of peace and tolerance', however, different interpretations of the religion and its holy scripts are difficult to understand for the average European. Starting from the late '70s in the 20th century, followed by the terrorist attacks conducted by Muslims and the huge influx of migrants on the European territory, the global perception of the Islam as peaceful religion started vanishing. On the top of it, the creation of the Islamic Caliphate in 2014 and the atrocities they caused and presented to the world by their very well organized propaganda, definitely changed the opinion of people concerning the Islam. What might not be easy to understand for the general public is the fact that this perception has been created on purpose in order to create fear from Muslims. In the European states where the concept of multiculturalism is trying to ease the accommodation of the migrants and allow peaceful co-existence of different cultures and religions, islamophobia is becoming a real problem. It is causing polarization and is threatening the concept of multiculturalism, as implemented by most of west European countries.

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