



FONDATION TRUDEAU FOUNDATION

Muslims in Western Societies

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Context for Discussions

In the 1950s, French intellectual André Malraux identified the rise of Islam as a central challenge to the Western world. He warned that the political effects of Islam's growth were wildly underestimated, that it was comparable in 1956 to the emergence of Leninism in the 1920s.¹ Revealing a Eurocentrism entirely characteristic of his time, and likely a desire to justify French colonial practices as well, Malraux descried an Islamic "problem": a "race" of people who preferred the preservation of their own identity to the benefits that could be brought to them by the West. Sifting out the powerful cultural, economic and political biases, one can still acknowledge Malraux's descriptive perspicacity. In 1956 he saw the complex amalgam of identity politics, conflicting belief sets and disruptions in established power relationships that would come to mark Islam's relations with Western societies fifty years later. He also helped to craft a narrative of conflict that resonates today even more strongly than in the mid-twentieth century. The point is not to commend Malraux's partial, even self-serving, analysis but to recognize his place in a wider pattern of Western thought that has shaped relations with Islam.

The growing role of Islamic societies was partially masked during the Cold War, with a variety of emerging patterns largely hidden from global scrutiny behind the curtains of American and Soviet power. In the 1990s these curtains were rent asunder and Islamic politics grew more and more salient in international affairs. At the same time, Islamic immigrant communities in a number of Western states became more politically active, and more radical. The interplay between Middle East politics and Western foreign policies came under harsh scrutiny. Building on the firmly established narrative of conflict reflected in Malraux, Samuel Huntington ratcheted up the level of anxiety when, borrowing from Bernard Lewis, Huntington described a growing "clash of civilizations".² Since the attacks on September 11th, 2001, many flashpoints of conflict have flared up, including: the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq; the abuse in Abu Ghraib Prison; the continuing conflict in the South Caucasus; the killing of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands; the 2005 London suicide bombings; the demonstrations

¹ André Malraux, le 3 juin 1956. (« C'est le grand phénomène de notre époque que la violence de la poussée islamique. Sous-estimée par la plupart de nos contemporains, cette montée de l'islam est analogiquement comparable aux débuts du communisme du temps de Lénine. Les conséquences de ce phénomène sont encore imprévisibles... Les données actuelles du problème portent à croire que des formes variées de dictature musulmane vont s'établir successivement à travers le monde arabe. Quand je dis "musulmane", je pense moins aux structures religieuses qu'aux structures temporelles découlant de la doctrine de Mahomet. ... Nous avons d'eux une conception trop occidentale. Aux bienfaits que nous prétendons pouvoir leur apporter, ils préféreront l'avenir de leur race. L'Afrique noire ne restera pas longtemps insensible à ce processus »).

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996)

following the publication of cartoon depictions of the Prophet in Denmark in 2006; and an alleged terror plot in Ontario in 2006 that resulted in many arrests.

In a working paper for the UN-sponsored “Alliance of Civilisations” High Level Group,³ the Director, Prof. Tomaz Mastnak, describes the negative ways in which the “clash of civilizations” framework has functioned politically:

Much as the Clash of Civilizations is about distribution of power and wealth, the pursuit of material interests became identity-based. As such, little room is left for negotiation and compromise; the ensuing conflicts are correspondingly extremist and exclusivist, bitter, brutal, violent and destructive.

The point is not that the rhetoric of conflict creates the conflict; only that it provides a framework through which existing sources of conflict are channelled, perhaps radicalized, and most worrisome of all, are made to seem inevitable. Strangely, the effects of the narrative of conflict are felt not only as between Islam and The West, but also within these constructs as well.

The point to emphasise is that there is no “Islam” and there is no “West”, at least if these terms are understood to represent unified, monolithic ideas or societies. Indeed, it is odd even to juxtapose a religion and a (meta)-physical space. There are numerous Islams – religious, political and geographical, just as there are numerous Wests. The West of the current US administration has defined itself in part against the West of “old Europe”. The West of Japan is different in many ways from the West as defined by a Greco-Roman-Semitic heritage. But the narrative of conflict universalizes the concepts of Islam and the West. Within the West it constructs an enemy that must be appeased or challenged or fought. Within Islam, it ironically reaffirms internal sentiment – for which indigenous political, cultural and religious leaders bear heavy responsibility – that all the problems of Islamic societies are based in eternal grievance against the unified and rapacious West. The bitter politics of “humiliation” and resentment are fed. Finally, as Mastnak suggests, the “clash of civilizations” reduces all conflict over resources, economic distribution, and political power and influence into an identity-based conflict. Although the very ideas of “civilization” and “civilizations” are deeply contested, the clash is simplified into an epochal battle over conflicting values between monolithic cultural entities. The rhetoric of civilizational clash also suppresses a broader phenomenon, that is the re-assertion of religion in various forms within public debate in many Western societies. The clash we experience might be less “civilizational” than ideological, between secularism and religion, especially religion in its “traditionalist” or “orthodox” guises.

As is apparent from the preceding discussion, it is not possible to separate out the international and national aspects of Muslim-Western relations. Economic inequality and grievance, the historical support of the so-called Great Powers for totalitarian regimes in the Arab world and in other predominantly Muslim societies, nineteenth- and twentieth-

³ The UN High Level Group should issue its report in late 2006, coinciding with the 2006 Trudeau Conference. An attempt will be made to directly connect the two initiatives.

century Western colonialism, the recent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the perennial sore of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a pervasive Arab sense of political bias in the West – all these factors may help to shape the attitudes of Muslim minorities within Western societies. One must also acknowledge the transnational aspirations of what could be described as the ummic narrative of Muslim identity, which speaks to a connection amongst Muslims across borders, a connection rooted in history and tradition, doctrine, and current politics. There is evidence that transnational actors are active in seeking to influence Islamic politics and practices within Western societies. Inversely, the construction of the Islamic threat represented by Malraux, Lewis and Huntington shapes the attitudes of the majority populations within Western countries, justifying “security” measures that disproportionately affect Muslim populations.

And yet relations between Islam and The West may have to be differentiated along national lines. The international conflicts and transnational historical preoccupations are not strictly determinative of relationships within national societies. That is why the title of this conference is not “Islam in Western Societies”, but “Muslims in Western Societies”. The focus will be on people, not a supposedly unified religion or ideology. In the aftermath of the Danish publication of the cartoons depicting the Prophet, reactions of Muslim populations were diverse. Violence erupted in many countries, mass demonstrations in others. In Canada, where the cartoons were later published in a Western Canadian magazine, the response was decidedly muted. Letters to the editor were written and a complaint filed with the Alberta Human Rights Commission. How can we explain these differences in reaction?

First, it is important to emphasise the diversity of Islams, with different traditions and practices amongst diverse adherents (Shia, Sunni, various legal schools, etc). Although one strain of Islamic thought posits a fundamental unity of all Islam, it does seem to be the case that Islam has been shaped by its expression in different regions of the globe. The interaction of Islam with local cultures affects attitudes and practices. Indeed, as is true for all religions, it is often the case that claims made in the name of Islam are really rooted in local culture and not in any moral imperative of a textual religious origin. When do political and other grievances come to be expressed in religious terms? Second, because of the diversity of Islams and the diversity of local cultural interactions, it is necessary to trace out the precise patterns of Muslim immigration in particular Western countries and at particular times. It matters where people come from, both geographically and in terms of tradition. It matters how they were educated. It also matters when they leave their home and arrive in a new society. The political and social situation of the country of origin at a given time may influence expectations and attitudes of émigrés. Moreover, the receiving society may react differently to certain immigrant groups at specific points in the processes of economic and social development. It may also matter how many people come from a particular group: is a specific tradition of Islam dominant in a given country of immigration, or is there a wide diversity of Muslim expression? Third, it may be relevant to note the differential effects of various policies of immigration and multicultural practice in different Western societies. The economic and social position of Muslim populations is not identical across Western countries. Finally, how do particular Western societies conceive of the relationship between religion

and the state? Are doctrines of *laïcité* or “separation of church and state” applied in an even-handed way? Are some religions more equal than others?

It will not be possible to address all of these issues with equivalent concern over a two-day conference. In seeking to find a balance in the discussion, the goal will be to advert to the international and historical contexts, and to continuing conflicts, but to try to centre most of the dialogue around the themes that relate specifically to the relationships between Muslims and other citizens and residents within Western societies. The approach will be comparative. The initial goal will be to establish some basic factual parameters, as much as this is possible with the sociological and demographic materials at our disposal. To keep an appropriate focus, materials will be presented in advance of the Conference setting out the relative economic, social and political situation of Muslim populations in Canada, the UK, India, France, and Australia; we will also try to identify patterns of immigration, and population growth or decline. In addition, it would be helpful to trace out the internal politics of Muslim communities in Canada and in the comparator countries.