



Immigration and Security European Challenges and International Perspectives

Panel 6

Religion and Identity: Building Bridges or Barriers

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Ajay Mehta

In the Indian context, everyone has been discussing the issues of religion and identity for six decades, especially in the last 20 years, as Islam has become more assertive. Religion plays an increasing role in politics. As Huntington has stressed, religion is a mobilizing factor for groups and India is the second largest Moslem country. But India also has many other religions, and public opinion surveys have identified thousands of different Indian identities, based on religion, race, caste, etc. All of these identities can be mobilized politically with the right catalyst. These identities impact on political motivation, nation building, majority and minority relations and social issues. Gandhi, a deeply religious individual, wanted the state and politics kept out of religion. Nehru thought it would be involved, but would fade in time.

While Muslims have been the traditional minority when it comes to the terms of the Indian debate, other minorities are now asserting themselves in majority/ minority issues. Ethnic groups are being used as a vehicle and platform for a number of political parties. Such an approach only exacerbates tensions and the stress instead needs to be on co-existence, based on respecting each others' boundaries, a message which can have great resonance in India. It is an approach that, while sometimes true in India, is also often not, not least because it is often not only religion that is involved in creating friction between groups. Other issues, such as ethnicity, economic disparities, etc. also play major roles in causing divisions. Overall, it is a very complex dynamic. Dr Mehta proposed a hypothesis: that religion builds bridges, not barriers, where willingness to compromise exists.

In 2005, the Indian government set up an inquiry to investigate the reasons for the relative social and economic backwardness of India's Moslem population, including issues such as the low level of Moslem representation in major official institutions, such as the armed forces and civil service. The investigation was seen as an attempt at a cover up and was heavily criticized by Muslim extremists, and bomb blast occurred in various places of worship. There was also a strong reaction on the part of sections of Hindu opinion, which claimed that the Indian Government was appeasing the minority at the expense of the majority. As part of this backlash, some Hindu commentators labeled all Muslims as terrorists, although many Muslims condemned the various attacks and terrorism generally. This interplay

between the micro and macro goes on all the time in India, where small incidents are used to label entire communities and marginalize them from society as a whole.

Rabeya Mueller

The discussion now underway makes it sound as if Muslims are the only migrants. But we need to understand that this is a label used by the majority to categorize Islam and make it seem to be a foreign faith and source of terrorism. Muslims have seen their quality of life diminished since 9//11, despite the fact that many Moslem communities tried to show that they were loyal to the state. But all of this was thrown overboard as the hunt began for the danger within. Few in the majority community noticed that "normal" Muslims have nothing to do with crime or terrorism. There is, as a result of this myopia, a constantly growing fear and rejection of Islam, which is subject to double standards when it comes to its treatment by the state, especially in Germany. There is a pressing need for religious education in schools that stresses a moderate brand of Islam, as experience shows that well-educated Muslims tend to reject demagogues.

The reality right now, however, is that because of a lack of German born and educated religious leaders, Muslims in Germany are under the control of foreign-born Imams, and even secular leaders are often from overseas. To counter this reality, we need to encourage more moderate voices to speak up and challenge existing hierarchies for leadership roles. As part of this promotion of a more liberal brand of Islam, one suited to Western European sensibilities, social mores, and political realities, we need to promote the idea of the equality of women as a modern value of Islam.

Moslem societies in Europe are changing, and while their external structure remains, there are already underway attempts to extensively refurbish the community's interior dynamics. Such a restructuring would recognize the ever-greater diversity that is a characteristic of Moslem communities, which now consist of a patchwork of identities. But the majority community still lacks any normative understanding expectations of Muslims, and Muslims themselves don't impose new thinking and behaviors on unwilling co-religionists.

It may well be that a unified culture is not achievable or even desirable. We all need to work together to build a new society, one that can include a Moslem identity. Part of this building process, however, must involve an end to the manipulation of the Koran to promote extremist views, a situation that only Muslims themselves can address. To sum up, Europe needs to press ahead with the integration of its Moslem minority, and Muslims must aid this process by building a unique European Islamic identity.

Claudia Koonz

How do we frame the values we all share? We can't use the rhetoric of the Cold War. The use of military force is an exclusive policy, while policies based on education and health care are inclusive. Many in the West, as avowed secularists, need to admit that all religious 'isms' terrify us, whether it be Islamism, Christianity, etc. We need to get over our terror of religion. We have far to go, not least in addressing stereotypes. Take, for example, the recent very popular Turkish film, "Valley of the Wolves." With a Turkish Moslem audience in mind, the filmmakers have deliberately made sure the film contains all the stereotypes, with the Christian and Jewish characters all evil, or at least bad, while all the Muslims who are featured are honest and good.

Nor are secularists immune to this type of stereotyping. The headscarf debate in France, both in 1989 and in 1994, painted the issue of girl's wearing headscarf as the tip of an Islamist plot. The position that has been staked out is simple: if you are anti-headscarf, then you are pro-French. The tone of the debate changed in 2001, when the girls who wanted to wear the headscarf and their supporters played the issue as one more linked to an anti-colonialism stance, politics rather than mere religion. It is a dilemma for the French, with their tangled history. The British left their empire with more grace. There is much more bad feeling in France about de-colonization, from Vietnam to Algeria to sub-Saharan Africa.

But it is not only history that raises hackles in France. The reality is that the country is home to many more Muslims than anywhere else in Europe, and they are a very marginalized community. For example, anti-racism in France has long largely focused on anti-Semitism. At the same time, there is a steady stream of stories that come out of the Islamic community that stresses how 'un-French' that community is. Survivor tales of women in Islam are omnipresent and all stress the persecution and brutality that all too many women face in the conservative culture of France's Muslims. This entire flood of negative publicity ignores another reality, one where insiders in the Islamic community are free to criticize Islam in a way no outsider can. The expression of this reality is that at least some Moslem women are able to stress the need to achieve liberal human rights, and fight patriarchy in Islam, while remaining part of the overall Moslem community. In such a situation, it is religion that can best build bridges, especially to the vast majority of Moslem women, who remain devout and observant of their faith's strictures

Professor Koonz presented images to accompany part of her presentation, including photos of Muslim girls in favor of the headscarf wearing French flags, and the covers of a large number of recent books by Muslim women that are critical of Islam.

Mira Kamdar

Revivalism is not just a Moslem phenomenon, i.e. there are many born-again Christians and newly observant Hindus. We need also to remember that even the most secular democracies still have religious aspects to their public lives. We all live with multiple identities, including religion.