Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

Islam in a Changing Europe: Cultural Identity, Citizenship, and Social Policy

11-13 Rabiᶜ al Awwal 1413 / 9-11 September 1992
University of Bradford Management Centre
Bradford, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom

The conference *Islam in a Changing Europe* was held amid growing concern about the future of Islamic and other minority communities in Europe. The organizers, Hafīz Mirza and David Weir (both at the Management Centre), Waqar Ahmad, Charles Husband, and Reg Walker (Department of Social and Economic Studies), regarded it as opportune for several reasons. First, the Gulf War, the tragic situation in Bosnia, and the continuing crises throughout Europe and the Middle East are grim but timely reminders of the tensions pervading European and Islamic relations, despite strong political, social, and economic ties of mutual interest. The impact on European Muslims is of particular concern, as they are the largest minority in Europe and thus primary targets of the "new" racism.

Second, this precarious position is further affected by the European Community's pursuit of a Single European Market and, ultimately, a unified polity. The large Islamic communities in the EC, the geographical proximity of the Islamic world, and the "demonization" of Islam in the western media and political imagination raise the specter of "Europeanness" being defined in contradistinction to "Islam." Rising fascist attacks on minority communities throughout Europe are the harbinger of dangers that must be understood and addressed now. Moreover, these attacks are merely the overt manifestations of underlying social changes in Europe. The implications for Muslims in Europe need to be examined, as they are potentially more invidious because of their subtle and subliminal impact.

Finally, and symbolically, in marked contrast to the triumphalist celebrations in Spain and elsewhere, and as a warning that today's racist and fascist attacks on "non-Europeans" have deep-rooted historical antecedents, it is worth recalling that 1992 is *also* the five-hundredth anniversary of the European invasion of the Americas, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the extinction of the Muslim kingdom of Granada.

In sum, the organizers opined that the position of *all* minorities will be thrown into sharp relief by the European quest for identity as the majority cultures of the EC (and further afield) seek to integrate. Islam would perforce act as the "Other" for a variety of reasons. The focus on Islam was not intended to suggest that the consequences of ongoing

events in Europe for other minorities were insignificant, but that Islam—being on the front line, as it were—could be treated as a metaphor for the serious predicament of all minorities in a changing Europe. With the help of a contribution of six thousand pounds sterling from CCETSW (the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work), the conference was convened to examine the many issues relating to "Islam in a Changing Europe" at both the conceptual and the concrete levels.

The conference took place over three days. The first day looked at broader conceptual and historical issues, including "The Other as Islam," "Muslim Communities of Europe," and "Citizenship and Participation." Following an initial address by Cllr. Mohammed Ajeeb (Deputy Leader of Bradford Council), the discussion was initiated by five papers: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Islam in a Changing Europe: Issues of Citizenship and Participation"; Noshaba Hussain, "Islam in a Changing Europe: An Alternative Perspective"; Hafiz Mirza, "Some Reflections on the European Perimeter"; Haleh Afshar, "Identity Ascribed and Adopted: The Dilemma of Muslim Women in Europe"; and Ali Hussein, "Culture, Faith and Political Ideology: Islam in an International Context."

The second day was devoted to more concrete case studies: education (initiated by Moeen Yaseen's "Islam and the Educational Systems of Europe," with David Weir acting as discussant); immigration (Paul Gordon, "Islam as Europe's Other: Restrictive Immigration Policy as a Response to the Muslim Presence," with S. I. Ananthakrishan as the discussant); gender and social policy (Sitara Khan, "Muslim Women in Britain: The Lessons of Experience"); and social welfare (Charles Husband and Waqar Ahmad, "Religious Identity, Welfare and Citizenship: The Case of Muslims in Britain," with David Divine as the discussant).

The final day examined practical strategies relating to specific areas of concern via a series of workshops, including ones on education (convener: Abdul Mabud); women (Noshaba Hussain); and participation (Mansur Ansari). In addition, to round off the conference, two views on Muslim futures were presented by Ishtiaq Ahmad and Zaki Badawi.

The whole conference was characterized by a forthright openness. Participants disagreed explicitly and at length, and the invited speakers presented analyses that were partisan and undiluted by euphemism. Yet while the discussions were robust and many different positions were vigorously asserted and defended, there was an exceptional lack of personal animosity. There was a very real sense of dialogue between the participants and a commitment to sharing both analyses and experience.

The mixture of Islamic scholars, community activists, academics, and other interested individuals, as well as of Muslims and non-Muslims, proved to be an important ingredient in facilitating the successful exchange of perspectives. What may be incapable of retrieval in the book that is planned to follow up the conference will be the atmosphere of

mutual respect and honest disagreement that emerged early in the conference and remained throughout.

If conferences are about creative discourse, promoting intellectual exchange, and generating a momentum that lasts beyond the event itself, then we may be grateful that this conference modestly achieved its goals.

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