

Islam and the West: Locating the culprits of an increasingly troubled relationship

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The recent murder of a British soldier by homegrown jihadis and the subsequent Islamophobic backlash has arguably played into a transcendent narrative centring on the seeming incongruence of 'Islam' with 'European' values. It has been suggested that fiscal disarray and threats to the political integrity of the EU are relational to this tension. In recent years EU policymakers have increasingly utilised what has been termed 'prescriptive liberalism' which has polarised relations with Muslims in the region. In this essay it will be suggested that selectivity in the media and shortcomings in education are the real culprits in driving wedges between communities and fuelling the intransigence of both 'European' and 'Islamic' rejectionist movements.

In a 2010 lecture entitled, “Can The West Live With Islam?”, Abdel Hakim Murad, the British Sufi and Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College, suggested that in light of Europe's failure to articulate a common cultural and economic vision, answering 'no' to this very question may be the lowest common denominator of what constitutes 'Europeanness'. He has written elsewhere that the failures evident in the European project have led Europe to rely increasingly upon a militantly secular identity seen as endogenous from the enlightenment, which has manifested itself as 'prescriptive liberalism' in the public sphere and brought European policy makers into conflict with Islam and Muslims residing in the region. This has spawned a furious public discourse on the legality and status of the headscarf, halal meat, minarets and mosques, honour killings, terrorism, the now embarrassing Turkish EU membership process, public prayer and much more. Confrontation essentially centres on competing notions of public expression seemingly inherent in the consciousness of the culturally Judeo-Christian West and the Islamic East, a senescent dichotomy which globalisation was supposed to have undermined.

Arguably this has not happened. Research from France suggests that the amount of French Muslims fasting the month of Ramadan has actually increased 10% in less than a decade, significant due to the fact that these are second and third generation Muslims many of whom have never even been to their ancestral homeland. Similarly the hopes of the British Home Office that the large numbers of Muslim immigrants who arrived after World War Two would intermarry, Anglicise and disappear has emphatically not happened. Today Muslim communities in enclaves throughout London, Birmingham and Leeds/Bradford remain stubbornly visible and vocal, particularly in light of British foreign policy in the Middle East. In short this narrative could be framed as a gradual western realisation of the incongruence of Islam with 'European' values.

I would argue that the issue can be broiled down to a basic lack of understanding and dialogue, a term which admittedly sounds twee and naïve but is evidenced by western medias preoccupation on figures such as al-Qaida's Ayman al-Zawahiri ignoring entirely mainstream Muslim leaders such as Abdel Hakim Murad (known also as Timothy Winter). Murad was recently voted Britain's most influential Muslim thinker by Jordan's Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre and has been credited with leading many young radicals away from the narrow confines of fundamentalism into the wider fields of Islamic history and mysticism. Despite his influence and contribution to theology and inter-faith dialogue he remains unknown to the media saturated masses. A few years ago the London based Prospect Magazine conducted a global poll to find the worlds leading public intellectuals, number one came out the Turkish religious leader

Fethullah Gülen to which the editor, David Goodhart admitted he had never heard of. Indeed it does seem the case, that Gülen's religious movement and enormous network of educational facilities and contribution to Islamic theology is widely ignored at the expense of hook wielding fanatics. To many Muslims this selective fixation rightly looks like hypocrisy and underpins myopic decisions such as the UK Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's proposed alterations to the British school curriculum which the Muslim Council of Britain claims omits any reference to the Islamic world and its contribution to European society.

If I consider my own education, with the exception of a cursory class on Islam in religious studies, the faith of about a quarter of humanity was entirely neglected, instilling no antidote to the societal wide Islamophobia which ensued post 9/11. Often a BBC documentary will be aired telling the great story of how the Arabs preserved the writings of Aristotle and Plato as though this was some sort of esoteric knowledge when such information should be embedded deep in the consciousness of Europe, not consigned to academia.

This selectivity and hypocrisy is of course only one side of the coin, groups such as the EDL, Golden Dawn in Greece and the Danish People's Party do not have a monopoly on intolerance and intransigence. Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir adopt what can easily be construed as a pugnacious attitude towards the ideals of cosmopolitanism and cultural assimilation which play into the hands of opposing extremist groups. Indeed the EDL was largely a response to protests launched by the now banned Islam4UK at Royal Wootton Bassett, where military funeral repatriations – British soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan arriving home in coffins – pass through the town. Such actions by minority groups make Islam viable in a manner not comparable to other religious minorities in Europe. Consider the very existence of the 'Yearbook of Muslims in Europe': In my view such an endeavour would simply not make sense in the same way with regards to Buddhists or Hindus, to aphorise; Islam attracts attention and gets it.

So is a rejection of Islam the lowest common denominator of what it means to be European? Certainly a commitment to 'prescriptive liberalism' has been a weapon utilised against Islamic public expression and a salient means of cohering what it means to be European dispute yawning differences between Europeans themselves. Many Europeans simply cannot comprehend why Muslims get so offended over arcane cartoons or tacky tasteless movies, similarly the fast paced materialistic lifestyle of the west is seen by some Muslims as decadent and soulless. I would contend that Abdel Hakim Murad is being overly dramatic in his statement, it is inescapable that Islam in the west has been problematic due to the conceptualisation of east and west as historic sparring partners. The dramatic expansion of Islam in the 7th century spurred the qua-

si-Europeans of Christendom to consider the troubling possibility that the Saracen hordes had God on their side. As a result Christendom began to articulate itself against Islam, their fear culminating in the period of Ottoman expansion and only subsiding in the colonial period when the supremacy of the west could no longer be denied. This narrative, as is rightly pointed out by the Muslim Council of Europe, ignores significant interaction between these supposedly diametrically opposed civilizations. The influence of the Islamic world in Europe cannot easily be underestimated, everything from medicine to architecture owes something to the Islamic world and we do ourselves a great disservice by ignoring or downplaying this. As the 'Yearbook of Muslims in Europe' highlights, Islam is no longer 'somewhere', the multi-faceted process of globalisation has made Islam in the west an inescapable reality. Problems arise when we think of Islam as belonging 'somewhere else' and conceptualise Islam as a usurper to the European way of life, (it is worth remembering that Christianity itself emerged in the Middle East usurping the native paganism).

A greater awareness of 'world' as opposed to 'regional' history is surely an antidote for the problems of Islam in the west, but this is a collective effort. Thus whilst 'prescriptive liberalism' has the potential to unite Europeans it is based on the fallacy that Europe evolved independently of the east. This stance must be developed through a higher degree of sensibility towards historical facts – only then is it possible to tackle the Islamophobia and Occidentosis which render competing modes of public expression so turbulent.