

Islam in Europe: immigration, opportunity, identity

PARIS. From the cobblestones of Stockholm's Old Town to the dusty alleys of Palermo, 12 million faces of Islam are changing the face of Europe. Knapsacks packing clothes, Korans and hopes for a better life, two generations of Arabs, Africans and Asians have brought Allah to every corner of this continent. They challenge its peoples to reconsider identities – their own and their new compatriots'.

France's car-burning ghettos showed last month that many Muslims actually 'immigrated' via Europe's maternity wards. But culturally, Europe's Muslims present the broadest wave of non-European immigration in centuries. Neither Muslim nor non-Muslim Europeans have forgotten that Christians stopped Islamic invasions at Poitiers in 732 and Vienna in 1683.

Throughout Europe, Islam takes many forms. Recent arrivals, especially women, often cling to their religion as an anchor in Europe's troubled seas of sex, drugs (including alcohol) and materialism. A broad mainstream, imitating the godless, post-Christian societies they are joining, skip five-times-a-day prayers and become Friday- and-Ramadan Muslims – or just festive, end-of-Ramadan *Eid ul-Fitr* Muslims. Probably 80 percent of French Muslims never set foot in a mosque at all, or perhaps just a few times a year. Many, like my local Tunisian-French grocer, can offer knowledgeable advice on wine. A few girls wear head-scarves, yet plenty of tight-jeaned young "Fatimas" and "Abdullas" embrace world youth culture.

A small, close-knit Muslim core tend the flame of Holy Islam with passionate introspection. They are the faithful of the faithful, the True Believers you find in any religion. Faith is their security, their whole identity. An even tinier core become paranoid reactionaries – successors of the "desert Muslims" denounced by Canadian Muslim critic Irshad Manji. Their fantasies feed murderous jihad against the corrupting West.

In a remarkable interview in the Paris daily *Le Monde* last week, Pascal Mailhos, chief of France's internal intelligence service, explained how hard it is to monitor these few real terrorists. Of 1,700 French mosques studied last year, terrorists had tried to destabilize 75. France expelled 31 radical preachers, and 10 others remained under observation. Of about 1,000 Muslim preachers, only a third spoke French well – most of their funding coming from Arab governments with ideological strings attached.

Most Muslim actors of the burning *banlieues* were peace-loving local imams. Far from fanning the flames, they helped douse them. They sent rioters home, calling for action on causes of revolt: lack of jobs, decent housing and acceptance by French society. What of violence-preaching Muslims? This tiny group rarely cruise mosques anymore. Extremist recruiters set up youth-clothing stores, after being unmasked running cyber-café and *halal* butcher-shops.

Models for accepting Muslims also vary. France, with over half of Europe's Muslims, has rhetorically, if not in practice, integrated its newcomers into a religiously and ethnically colour-blind "*République*." Tolerant Italy's half-million Muslims freely practice 10 kinds of Islam – their worst persecutor being 77-year-old flame-throwing writer Oriana Fallaci. Germany until recently reserved citizenship only for blood-line Germans – including even "Volga Germans" who spoke only Russian.

Britain, Holland and the Scandinavians have promoted multiculturalism – tolerance importing cultures and religions into familiar ethno-cultural communities. All these models offer pros and cons. It's too soon to know which ones work best. Meshing immigrant and host-country identities is tricky and changeable.

However they welcome immigrants, Europe's politicians are doing what their frightened voters ask: assert host-country culture, tighten the flow of legal immigrants, crack down on illegals and genuine refugees. Britain's Commission for Racial Equality, citadel of multiculturalism, now demands that all citizens absorb "a core of Britishness." France has just decided to limit family reunification (especially in polygamous African families), overseas marriages, even student visas.

Each European country must find its own style of integrating Muslims. That's increasingly difficult for both Muslims and their Judeo-Christian "hosts:" both sides feel their identities are fragile. Muslims ricochet between ancestral and new-country identities. Old Europeans, abandoning their churches to tourists, wince watching mosques piercing the sky.

Muslims, especially the young and jobless, crave acceptance as Europeans – in jobs, political and media representation, business opportunities. Only if denied these, especially work, will most seek core identity in religion. The deeper hosts' rejection, the more radical the answering Islam -- Osama bin Laden loves unemployment.

Misunderstanding between Old and New (Muslim) Europeans focuses on clashes of identity. But beneath much anxiety lies competition for scarce jobs. French joblessness has just trickled down slightly for the seventh consecutive month, but it stays stuck at 9.7 percent – double Britain's.

A sobering – and reconciling? -- thought for all: low Old-European birthrates, early retirement and lengthening life-spans guarantee that Europe's rich pension funds will go broke in a decade or two. To refund them, Europe needs millions of new, young, ready-to-work immigrants *every year*. Most of these will inevitably be Muslim. Say wise Europeans: Forget Poitiers and Vienna. Let 'them' in. Save our pensions.