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The Islamisation of Europe: Myth or Reality?

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Discussion of the Islamisation of Europe is increasing, but the claim lacks evidence or empirical credibility. What is fuelling this agenda, and how can it be countered?

Commentary

RECENT DISCUSSION about the influx of refugees from Syria into Europe has intensified claims that Christian Europe is surely and inexorably giving way to Islam: the Islamisation thesis. In the United Kingdom some seemingly trivial events have become flashpoints for this in the media. The *Daily Mail* columnist Peter Hitchens claimed that the wearing of a hijab by a model in an advertisement for the fashion store H&M was a sign of “a slow but unstoppable adaptation of this country to Islam”. This led to a televised clash and subsequent debate on Twitter.

Again, a BBC television programme the “Great British Bake Off” (GBBO) was won by a hijab-wearing lady. Various newspapers accused the BBC of choreographing a politically correct outcome, and considerable virulence against Islam, the hijab, and a multicultural society was exhibited in online reactions, alongside the fear that an Islamic takeover was occurring. Of course, this is not recent; perhaps the most dramatic indication of such fears were the actions of Anders Breivik gunning down numerous youths in his native Norway for his belief that he needed to defend Christian Europe against Islam.

Identity politics and statistics

There are now more Muslims in Europe than at any time in history, partly driven by new waves of immigration. Alongside this, Christian belonging has declined in many

Western European nations. Therefore predictions that the numbers of active Muslims may outnumber active Christians during the 21st century in countries like the UK and France are not inconceivable. It is far from certain though that Islam will replace a mainstream secular culture and Christian heritage.

Indeed, backing for the Islamisation hypothesis often involves massaged statistics. In the UK, many media sources rely on Migration Watch which presents itself as a neutral and impartial source; however, Professor Christian Dustmann of the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration has said that their use of a report he co-authored was “simply wrong”.

Their predictions of Islamic growth are challenged on other grounds, for instance, basing predictions for immigrant birth rates on figures relating to home countries, ignoring evidence that immigrant population birth rates deviate to match those of the new country. Islamisation is therefore often based upon a misapprehension of the actual situation, and presents what many term an “alarmist” case for huge and imminent cultural changes, stoking potential fears about loss of cultural identity.

Analysing the GBBO debates, Dr Clara Sandelind argued there was a battle over what characterised British identity. This could be said to be true across much of Europe. One camp welcomes the new influx of migrants, and celebrates the open-mindedness shown by the victory of a hijab-wearing Muslim in such a stereotypically traditional British craft. The other camp argues British identity needs to be defined against multiculturalism, especially Islam.

Many high profile European political leaders in France, the UK, and Germany amongst other places have echoed sentiments like the following: Europe is a Christian continent; multiculturalism has failed. While not all speak of Islamisation, such messages give credence to the latter camp. The message appears that a white Christian identity is becoming swamped by an alien Islamic culture.

Categorising Muslim identities

The Islamisation agenda rests upon a number of assumptions. One of these is that Islam is foreign to Europe. Historically this is demonstrably false: Spain was for many centuries a major Muslim stronghold, while the Balkans has had a Muslim population for centuries, and many countries have almost certainly had Muslim visitors since the Middle Ages, with more settled populations for a century or more. For instance, the UK's first mosque was built in 1889, Germany had an Islamic cemetery from 1798, and mosques were recorded in Poland from the sixteenth century.

Another assumption is that Islamic values are antithetical to European/Christian ones. Again, this lacks credibility. The history of thought shows that the key ideas of Greek philosophy and science that came to underpin mainstream Christian thought for centuries, as well as enable the Renaissance, and the development of modern science were all mediated to Europe through Islamic societies and advances made by Islamic thinkers.

When Europe sought a model for religious tolerance in the period of the

Enlightenment it looked to the treatment of other religions in the Islamic Ottoman Empire, whose tolerance far surpassed anything then found in Christian Europe.

Such assumptions could be multiplied, but always the Islamisation thesis tends to rest on the creation of binary opposites: Christian Europe vs Islamic world; European democracy vs Islamic theocracy; Christian tolerance vs Islamic intolerance; etc. Each of these when examined appears as no more than a stereotype or misrepresentation.

The myth of Islamisation

If Islamisation is a myth, why then is it seemingly growing and becoming more prevalent? Also, what can be done about it? The answer is simple but complicated. Powerful political and personal interests are vested in those promoting it. Islamisation employs powerful media images and binary oppositions that are built into many European perceptions of the world, as examined by Edward Said in his Orientalism thesis.

Further they are fuelled by media (mis)representations of Islam through association with ISIS or other unrepresentative examples; meanwhile potentially positive images of Islam, like a hijab wearing lady who bakes fantastic cakes, are used to show a takeover. Greater education and reliable data and analysis are not always easy to propagate in this context.

Moreover, in the battle of identity politics it is hard for the public and the media to identify which story has greater credibility. The battle requires not just putting the facts out in ways which are compelling and accessible, but also creating a narrative that people can identify with and promoting a positive message about tolerant European values.

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