

ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN EUROPE TODAY

Impact International

28 February – 13 March 1975

PROF. KHURSHID AHMAD



ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN EUROPE TODAY

Khurshid Ahmad*

Islam, the second largest religion in Europe today, is also the most misunderstood religion. Its popular image is still cast in the moulds forged in the Middle ages to arouse passions against Islam, which was generally looked upon, not as a world religion and civilization, but merely as a 'rival political power'. The popular image of the world of Islam continues to linger under that shadow: the image either of a 'marauding horde of the Anti-Christ' or that of an 'exotic world of Arabian Nights', abounding in mystery, lust, extravagance and unreality. These images were blown into existence to serve specific political ends; they were inflated or deflated to suit the changing patterns of politico-religious relationships between the world of Islam and the West. Although these images have now begun to become somewhat stale (the present-day Arab-bashing oiled by the so-called energy crisis notwithstanding) and no serious student would subscribe to them, they continue to pollute the public mind and constitute an obstacle to a correct understanding of Islam and Muslim life.

II

Although a number of sizeable Muslim communities have recently emerged on the socio-religious map of Europe, Islam is not a newcomer to this part of the world. There has been some, often significant, Islamic presence in Europe at least from the

beginning of the eighth century of the Christian era.

Muslims came to Spain in 711 C.E. and established an illustrious civilization over a large part of the Iberian peninsula that lasted until 1492—that is for about eight centuries. They came to Sicily in the Mediterranean in 831 and had a distinguished innings lasting over 260 years. Both these centres of Islamic civilization exerted continuous and lasting influence on the intellectual, cultural and religious life of Europe.

The second phase of the Islamic presence in Europe began in the eleventh century when Muslim sufis and scholars came to Eastern Europe and won large populations over to Islam¹. Islam in Eastern Europe did not have any political umbrella for some three centuries. It was only in the fourteenth century that Ottoman rule over the Balkans began. This lasted till the 19th century. During this period, Ottoman Caliphate was a leading world power. At the height of its power in the seventeenth century, its suzerainty extended over most of the Eastern and South Eastern Europe, up to Greece on one side, to the gates of Vienna on the other, and deep into Kazakhstan, now in the USSR.

The third phase began with Western inroads in the Muslim world, represented, among others, by the conquest of vast Muslim lands by different European powers, roughly from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. With the retreat of Western colonialism and the rise of over forty Muslim states after World War II, this phase has come to an end, although its shadow remains cast on political, economic and cultural structures that lie at the root of relationships between Europe and the Muslim world. Things are, however, changing and a new beginning in the relations between Europe and the world of Islam seems possible.

All the three phases we have referred to above were characterised by political rivalries, wars and bad blood. But this is not the whole of the story. Islamic thought and culture continued to influence almost every branch of knowledge and every field of activity in Europe². The new

awakening represented by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment were, in various degrees, products of the Islamic impact. Philosophy, science and technology, even language and literature derived new life from the values and contributions of Islamic culture. In the realm of knowledge and science and culture and commerce, Islam and Europe were in unceasing contact with each other. Scientific method was developed by Muslims and the West acquired its new technology from them. The light which illuminated Europe's dark medieval age and enabled it to enter the modern phase of its life came from Spain and the Muslim East. The Universities of Paris, Oxford and Cambridge came into existence under the influence of the Universities of Spain. Muslims failed to maintain that momentum, but the new upsurge of Europe had its inspiration and early push from its contact with the world of Islam³.

Islamic teachings were also being introduced at the grass-root level and large numbers of people were embracing Islam. Strong Muslim communities were developing in different parts of Europe. The present day Spain, Portugal and Sicily were once predominantly Muslim. In the Eastern Europe, large Muslim communities have existed over the last nine centuries. Cyprus had a Muslim majority till the first quarter of the nineteenth century; so had Bosnia-Herzegovina in Yugoslavia till the beginning of the twentieth century. Rev. Samuel M. Zwemer puts the Muslim population of South Eastern Europe (excluding Russia) at 3.41 million at the turn of the century⁴. In a later work, "Across The World of Islam", the same author describes some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Muslim communities of South Eastern Europe in mid-twenties. The Muslims, he says, constitute 18% of the total population of Bulgaria, 71% of Albania, 12% of Yugoslavia and 12% of Rhodes and Dodecanese. Romania and Greece, according to his estimate, had 200,000 and 180,000 Muslims respectively⁵. Muslim authorities regard these estimates

of Muslim population in this part of Europe as too much on the lower side. In certain cases, they regard Zwemer's estimates to be only half of the real Muslim population⁶. Small Muslim communities have existed in France, Italy, Great Britain and the Netherlands over the last two centuries. The position has, however, significantly changed during the last fifteen years because of the Muslim immigration in most of the European countries. It is disappointing that there is very little recognition of the Muslims' position in Europe. To take only two instances, "The World Christian Handbook, 1968", which tries to present the numerical strength of different religions in different parts of the world, puts the Muslim population of Europe at 13.3 million and assumes that Muslims do not exist in any non-communist European country except Greece⁷. "The Statesman's Yearbook, 1974/1975" acknowledges Muslim presence only in five Communist countries of Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Yugoslavia) and two non-Communist countries (Cyprus and Greece). Of these seven countries figures of Muslim population are given only for five countries⁸. The fact that a large Muslim minority of over one million exists in the country where the book has been written and produced fails to get any mention in the book. Muslims may find it difficult to believe that such a black-out is simply an oversight!

III

In most of the European countries, census figures do not reveal the religious composition of the society. As such one has to depend on secondary sources to compute the Muslim population in Europe. On the basis of available information and evidence, we estimate that the Muslim population in Europe is little over 24 million, i.e. between 3 to 4 per cent. of the total population of Europe⁹. The position in Communist and non-Communist Europe is as follows:

Region	Muslim population	As % of total population
A. Russia (European parts only)	10,000m.	
B. East Europe (Communist): Albania,		

*The writer is Director General, The Islamic Foundation, based in Leicester, U.K., and a member of the Executive Committee of the Islamic Council of Europe. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent the official views of these organisations.

Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia (except German Democratic Republic), 8.458m.	6.75%
C. Europe (the rest): Andora, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, W. Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Rhodes, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden and United Kingdom	5.618. 1.64%
Total	24.076m.

In the UK, West Germany and France, the number of Muslims is approximately 1 million, 1.5 million and 2 million respectively. For Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Netherlands and Italy, the figures are between one hundred thousand to half a million.

The Muslim communities in Europe reflect in full measure a distinct feature of Islam: unity in the context of variety. The communities consist of local Muslims and immigrants who have come from all parts of the Muslim world. In France, local Muslims constitute about twenty-five per cent of the community; their number is significant in other parts as well although not in the same proportion. It would be safe to suggest that generally speaking the local Muslims go to make up between five and ten per cent of the Muslim community. Muslim immigrants from Turkey and Yugoslavia are concentrated in West Germany, although there are sizeable Turkish groups in France. The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. Immigrants from North Africa are concentrated in France, Belgium and Italy and to a lesser extent in W. Germany. Switzerland, the UK and Scandinavian countries. The Netherlands have large Muslim communities from Indonesia, Malaysia and Central America. Muslims from India and Pakistan are concentrated in the UK, although there are sizeable groups in the Netherlands, West Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Almost all major Muslim traditions have found new

homes in different parts of Europe and a cross-fertilization of cultures is taking place.

Demographic analysis of the Muslim communities shows that between fifteen to twenty per cent of the Community in the UK and between ten to fifteen per cent in the rest of Europe is under 21 years. Males far exceed the females and are generally in the most productive part of their life—between 25-45 years. Among the main reasons for this male preponderance is the fact that most of these people had come in search of jobs and their families usually joined them only after some time. As such there is a lag between the migration of men and women. In certain countries, there are a number of restrictions on bringing in the families. Some immigrant workers regard their stay as temporary and as such prefer to visit their families back home once or twice a year, instead of bringing them to their places of work for settlement. An overwhelming majority of the immigrant Muslims are engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. The number of those engaged in skilled or highly professional occupations is somewhere between three to ten per cent of the total population of the community. Students engaged in higher education are also a significant sector of the Muslim community.

IV

There is no priesthood in Islam. It does not have any central organisation to which all its members must be tied. The community is free to organise its religious and social life as it deems fit. In an Islamic state the state takes care of certain collective responsibilities. But otherwise (and in addition to) the community organises its cultural and religious life through a number of institutions, most important being the family, the mosque, the "madrasah" (school) and cultural and religious centres and organisations.

Muslims pray five times a day. Although the daily prayers can be offered individually, it is urged that they are offered collectively. However the once a week post-noon prayer on Friday must be offered in congregation.

Similarly the Eid prayers are offered collectively. Establishment of proper mosques is the first major problem that the new Muslim communities face in Europe. There are very few purpose-built mosques, although some are now coming up. In the UK, a Central Mosque is being built in London and one each are coming up in Manchester and Birmingham. Similar efforts are being made in a number of major cities. In the meanwhile, improvised arrangements have been made everywhere. Wherever there is a Muslim community, however small, it has an improvised mosque, usually in a residential house, or even a room set apart for prayers. There are over three hundred such mosques in the UK and several thousand all over Europe. There are Central Mosques in Paris, Hamburg, Munich, Aachen, Brussels and a number of other places. Lack of co-operation or understanding on the part of the authorities as well as huge building costs are problems that confront the Muslim communities almost all over Europe.

Excepting two countries—Belgium and Austria—Islam has nowhere been officially acknowledged as one of the religions of the country. This shying away is hardly understandable. There is no denying that these states are secular states. But whatever rights and facilities are given to one or two religions, there is no reason why the same should not be extended to other religious communities.

Muslims have made arrangements for a rudimentary education in Islam of their children in mosques and other places by organising evening or week-end classes. This education is, however, insufficient to properly initiate the new generations in the Islamic faith and culture. In the UK and Belgium, some efforts are being made to provide Islamic instruction in state schools. This opportunity arises from the fact that in these countries religious instruction is provided in schools and the law provides that other religious groups can, with the co-operation of the school authorities and at their own expense, make arrangements for the religious education of children belong-

ing to their own faith. The Muslim Educational Trust in the UK is providing Islamic education to Muslim children in 57 county schools in major British cities¹⁰. There are plans to establish full-fledged schools with Islamic orientation. This problem has assumed a great importance because of the planned switch over in some places from single-sex schools to co-educational schools, a development which Muslims feel very concerned about.

In Europe, there exist a number of active Muslim organisations, Cultural Centres, youth clubs, students' associations and hostels, research foundations, etc. There is a nascent Muslim press in Europe and new Islamic literature has begun to be produced. Efforts are also being made to develop national organisations and coordinating councils on national and European bases. A Conference of all major Islamic Cultural Centres and organisations of Europe was held in London in May, 1973, which established an Islamic Council in Europe, with its headquarters in London. The Council has twenty-four constituent organisations all over Europe and is recognised by the Islamic Secretariat, Jeddah, as the representative body of Muslims in Europe¹¹.

The number of Muslim journals and magazines published in different languages from different parts of Europe is increasing. Leading journals and papers are: From London "Impact International", fortnightly; "Islamic Quarterly"; "The Muslim", bi-monthly; "al-Ghoraba", Arabic bi-monthly; "Millat", Urdu daily; "Jang International", Urdu daily; "Akhbar-e-Watan", Urdu weekly; "Paighan", Urdu monthly, Birmingham; "ar-Raid", Arabic, Aachen; "Le Monde Islamique" and "France-Islam" from Paris. Many smaller magazines, bulletins and newsletters are also produced.

V

Muslims face a number of problems. Most important of them is the threat of losing their religious and cultural identity. They are unhappy over efforts at such assimilation and integration as may destroy their personality. They went to live in Europe

... Muslims in Europe

as Muslims, and not as a culturally uprooted people. They believe that modern society will have to be a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. Democracy in the West has primarily been a political concept. The idea of social and cultural democracy with all its implications is yet to be learned and practiced. The Muslim society has always been a multi-religious and multi-cultural society¹². If Europe is prepared to develop this new dimension of democracy, Muslim presence can make significant contribution in the future growth of human society in this part of the world.

Democracy is not a political concept only. It does not achieve fulfilment merely by the assurance of political freedom and the establishment of the vote-mechanism. These conditions are necessary for democracy, but are not sufficient for its full flowering. The social and cultural dimensions of democracy are yet undeveloped. Political rights of the individual and of minority groups are acknowledged, but not their cultural and religious rights. Multiplicity of political opinions is welcome, but plurality of cultures is still an anathema. Differences in personal outlooks are tolerated, but differences in colours of the skin or in personal tastes and ways of living are frowned at. This is not a new phenomenon. Intolerance towards minority cultures, languages, modes of behaviour, education, social norms and even religions have persisted over the years¹³. Democracy has yet to embrace the concept of cultural diversity.

The idea of healthy cultural pluralism will add a new and richer dimension to democracy. The implications of this concept over the rights and duties of the state, the individual and the community organisations will have to be spelled out. Right to hold any belief is only a negative right—one should not be forced to abandon his faith or belief on the plea of non-conformity. Its positive aspects, that is the right of an individual to live and act in the light of his religious belief

—even if his religious community is in a minority¹⁴, have been neglected. Religious and cultural rights—including right to have religious education, to use non-conformist dress in schools, facilities for diet and sanitation, religious holidays, prayer facilities, etc., need to be recognised and provided for.

In certain parts of Europe, Muslims are facing religious persecution and gross cultural, even political discrimination. This is generally true of the whole of Communist Europe, but the situation is worst in Albania and Bulgaria. Several thousand mosques have been closed in Albania during the last ten years. In Bulgaria, the Communist Party and Government are pursuing a policy of forced assimilation of the Muslims in what they call the 'Bulgarian Slav Nation'¹⁵. Muslims are being forced to change their Islamic names and those who refuse to do so are dismissed from their jobs. During July, 1970 and December, 1972, 48,073 Muslims were dismissed from their jobs in six districts of Bulgaria for resisting 'Bulgarianization'. They were subjected to different forms of persecution, arrest and torture. Six thousand of them are said to have attempted to flee to Greece and Yugoslavia and the number of those killed by the border forces of Bulgaria is given at 765¹⁶.

In Albania and Bulgaria, mosques and religious schools are being closed. There is lack of freedom of worship and religious education. Muslims have been denied burial and circumcision facilities according to their religion. There are constraints on Muslim dress and the privacy of the Muslim home. Emigration (for which there is an old Treaty of 1925 between Bulgaria and Turkey) is being curbed with a heavy hand. In other Communist countries also, similar constraints exist, although the ferocity with which they are enforced differs from place to place. Yugoslavia is the only Communist country where prospects of religious freedom have slightly improved recently.

In Cyprus, the Muslim community had been a persecuted community. But conditions in Greece are deteriorating. There are over

200,000 Muslims in Greece. The community is four hundred years old. Discrimination against it has recently increased. Even in some non-Communist countries there are cases of discrimination based on religious, cultural or racial factors. These aberrations are symptoms of a disease which deserves to be properly diagnosed and cured. We feel that the rediscovery of the spiritual and moral foundations of life and society and the concept of socio-cultural democracy can provide the key to the solution of this problem.

One of the greatest problems that confront the Muslims at the religio-cultural level is that of proper religious education of their children. The facilities that are available are far short of the need. Tremendous effort and much more co-operative response from the majority community and the governments are needed to strike at the heart of the problem.

Distortion and misrepresentation of Islam and Islamic culture are major irritants to Muslims. Muslims are always prepared for academic discussion, informed disagreement, constructive criticism and meaningful dialogue. But the way Islamic religion and values are distorted by many Western writers, often in the name of scholarship, is a different tale¹⁷. Is it too much to expect from our European friends that they should first of all try to understand Islam as the Muslims understand it, and then form their own opinion about it. Muslims are in Europe not just to sell their labour. They want to live as equal citizens, sharing their achievements and contributing their mite towards the solution of the common problems of the society. They believe in a universal religion which stands for Oneness of God and oneness of mankind. There is a supra-national community—a fraternity of faith. They believe that the values and principles of Islam have something to offer to the Modern Man whom the contemporary systems have failed and who is looking for a system that can simultaneously fulfil the material and moral needs of the human society. Muslims look forward to a future where man-

kind would choose to live as one family of God, as His vicegerent on earth.

1. T. W. Arnold writes in an article in the "Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics": "The first introduction of Islam into Eastern Europe was the work of a Muslim Jurisconsult who was taken prisoner . . . and was brought to the country of the Pechenegs (between the lower Danube and the Don) in the beginning of the 11th Century; before the end of the century the whole nation had become Muhammadan". "Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics", Edinburgh, 1915, Vol. VIII p. 748.

2. Cf. Sanchez-Albornos says in "L'Espagne et l'Islam" (Spain and Islam): "Without a doubt, one can no longer talk today about 'the dark Middle Ages'. One must rather bear in mind that side by side with a Europe languishing in misery and decay, there existed the resplendent civilization of Muslim Spain. The leaders of Arab Studies in Spain today are opening up new horizons where the dissemination, effect and brilliance of this Hispano-Moorish culture are concerned. They have re-established the fact that it played a decisive role in the development of philosophy, science, poetry, indeed of every aspect of culture in Christian Europe. They have proved that its influence reached right to the heights of medieval thought, even as far as St. Thomas and Dante. Undoubtedly there are still many people who refuse to admit its supremacy and the formative role that it played. However, there is already more than ample proof of this, and every day still more come to hand. Several centuries before the Renaissance set springs that had half dried up flowing again, the stream of civilisation that flowed from Cordova preserved and transmitted to the modern world the essence of ancient thought." Quoted from Haider Bammate, "Muslim Contribution to Civilization", Geneva, 1962, p. 12.

3. See: William Draper, "History of the Intellectual Development of Europe", London, 1891, (2 vols.); Robert Briffault, "The Making of Humanity", London: Allen & Unwin, 1928; Joseph Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, "The Legacy of Islam", 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974; "The Cambridge History of Islam", Cambridge: C.U.P., 1970, Vol. II, Chapter 12.

4. S. M. Zwemer et al (ed.), "The Mohammedan World of Today", London: Fleming H. Revell Co., p. 290.

5. Samuel M. Zwemer, "Across the World of Islam", London: Fleming H. Revell Co., Chapter XVII pp. 343-363.

6. See: Amir Shakib Arsalan, "Hadith al-Alam al-Islami", (Comments on Lothrop Stoddard's "New World of Islam"), 4 volumes. Beirut: not dated but published between 1930 and 1936.

7. "The World Christian Handbook, 1968", London: Lutterworth Press, 1968, pp. 235-236.

8. "The Statesman's Yearbook, 1974/1975", (editor John Paxton), London: Macmillan, 1974.

9. These figures are taken from an unpublished study prepared by the writer for the Islamic Council of Europe. This study draws from all available Muslim and other sources and also utilises information obtained directly from different Islamic Centres of Europe. Those who want to see other studies on Muslim population (available in English) are requested to refer to Ahmad, Abdulhik, al-Masdoqi, "Living Religions of the World: A Socio-Political Study", (Tr. Z. I. Ansari Karachi: Begum Aisha Bawany Wakf, 1962; "World Muslim Gazetteer", Karachi: World Muslim Congress, 1964; Abbas Ali Khan, "An Estimate of the Muslim population of the World", Gary, Indiana: Muslim Students' Association of U.S.A. and Canada, 1969).

10. See "Report of the Muslim Educational Trust", London, 1974, and M. E. T. "Memorandum to the Ministry of Education", 1970.

11. For proceedings, see "Impact International", London, May, June, July, 1973. See also Salem Azzam,

"Islamic Council of Europe", in "Impact International", London, 22nd Nov.—12th Dec., 1974; and Dr. M. M. Ahsan, "Islamic Council of Europe", "The Criterion", Karachi, 1973.

12. John B. Taylor writes in a recent booklet: "Who have already seen how early Islam spread without forcing conversion upon Christians and Jews. Indeed those communities sometimes welcomed the guaranteed tolerance of other monotheistic religions which Islam offered. Even in the context of animist tribesmen in North Africa, and of the Hindus in India, Muslims showed themselves ready to co-exist with non-Muslims provided those non-Muslims were not hostile to Islam. It is significant that when the Jews were driven out of Christian Spain, they fled for protection to the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, where their legal and social rights as Jews could be preserved". John B. Taylor, "Thinking About Islam", London: Lutterworth Educational, 1971, p.41.

13. See: C. A. Macartney, "National States and National Minorities". Prof. Macartney was Secretary to the Minorities Committee of the League of Nations and his fully documented book is a lament for lack of cultural democracy. The League of Nations received hundreds of petitions from cultural and national minorities protesting against cultural imperialism which prevails within a national state.

14. This may be illustrated by reference to a report published in "The Daily Telegraph", London, some time ago. It throws light on the much neglected problem of positive religious rights. "An employee at F . . . 's factory faces dismissal from his £33 a week job because he has to keep leaving the assembly line to pray. He is Mr. R., 30. "Mr. R. was on his prayer mat in a corner of found by his factory chiefs kneeling the shop floor. He claims the Personnel Officer warned him he would be sacked if it happened again. Mr. R. said "I have to pray five times a day; usually I can manage it during my meal breaks. But there are times, depending on the position of the sun, when this is not possible and I have to down tools and kneel in a quiet corner. It does not take more than five minutes. I am prepared to have time deducted from my wages. My prayers are compulsory."

A. F . . . spokesman said yesterday, "Mr. R. insists on keeping to a rigid prayer timetable. Every time he leaves the assembly line another man must relieve him. We just cannot work this way." ("The Daily Telegraph", May 4th, 1973).

Our purpose here is not to go into the details of any individual case. The question at issue is that of general attitude towards positive religious rights. If a person goes to the toilet and "wastes" even more than five minutes in the process it is not regarded as a violation of work discipline. This is accepted as one of his personal rights. But if he wants to have five minutes off for religious prayers, the question of religious rights is not considered with any seriousness.

15. Resolution of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Resolution No. 549, issued on 17th July, 1970).

16. See "Impact International", London, 10-23 August, 1973.

17. See Khurshid Ahmad, Islam and the West, Lahore, 1963; A. Tibawi, English-Speaking Orientalists, London, 1967. See also Maxime Rodinson, "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam", The Legacy of Islam, (ed. by Schacht and Bosworth), Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1974, pp. 9-62.