

# Muslims in the Western World

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12 April 2019

Throughout most of their history, Muslims have lived within their homelands, known as “Daru’l Islam,” (House of Islam). Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the reconquest of southern Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, Muslims found themselves in a totally unfamiliar environment. As Bernard Lewis put it,

“In all these countries the reconquest was followed – sometimes after an interval of tolerance – by a determined effort on the part of Christian rulers to convert or else evict their Muslim subjects. In these efforts they were, in the long run, successful. In general, Christian unwillingness to tolerate Muslims was matched by Muslim unwillingness to remain under Christian rule. Most Muslim jurists held that it was impossible for a Muslim to live under a non-Muslim government. If an infidel in the lands of the infidels was converted to Islam, it was his duty to leave his home and country and travel to a land where Muslims ruled, and Muslim law prevailed. The scriptural authority for this doctrine was the migration (Hijra) of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina – the event which marked the birth of the Muslim state and the beginning of the Muslim era. Where the Prophet had led, others were expected to follow.<sup>i</sup>”

This historic tradition underwent a drastic change after World War II. The European nations had suffered the loss of millions of their citizens during the war and their economies were devastated. The post-war years also saw increasingly low birthrates in these war-torn lands. It is not difficult to understand then why European governments encouraged the influx of many foreign workers to help reinvigorate their economies.

Both Canadian and American laws governing immigration changed as well, allowing numbers of Muslims from the Middle East, North Africa, Somalia, and Pakistan, to settle in Canada and the U.S. Before very long, a few short decades, it became evident that the integration of Muslims into European and North American societies would prove very problematical. Immigrants of other religious beliefs made much smoother transitions to Western values and traditions without losing their religious identities.

Quite often, criticisms were levelled against Western societies for their unwillingness to facilitate the assimilation of Muslim immigrants. But when one studied the problem, it became evident that it was the Muslim side that was unwilling, or unable to integrate within the societies that had welcomed them. Their unwillingness or inability was due to the fact that these immigrants brought with them a religious baggage that was antithetical to Western culture.

By 2019, more than half a century has passed, since the arrival of large numbers of Muslims to the West. Several high-profile events have taken place during this period that require an examination of the specific problems that accompanied Muslim immigrants. It was not only Western writers that have pointed to this situation, but Arab reformist intellectuals have contributed articles that dealt with this troubling and alarming phenomenon.

For example, the Arabic-language reformist website, “al-Awan” published a book in September 2009 with the title, “The Muslim in the West.” A portion of the Introduction to this book was uploaded, giving a summary of its contents. The following excerpts, detail some of the serious problems that confront Muslims living in the West, as they seek to remain faithful to their traditions within a culture that adheres to a totally different worldview.

“It is quite evident that most Islamic states, and especially those of the Arab world, suffer from chronic underdevelopment, violence, and intolerance. Furthermore, they have in recent times, experienced civil wars, ethnic cleansings, confessional strife, and bloody dictatorships which practice barbaric physical torture. Women suffer from discriminatory laws of various degrees, with respect to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Forced marriages are still tolerated, and when it comes to crimes of honour, it is always the (woman) victim that is punished, while the aggressor goes free!

“When we take these factors into consideration, we become aware of the many obstacles and challenges that face Muslims living in the West, such as: How to harmonize Islamic and Western values; how to succeed in education and work; how to re-educate young Muslims with respect to the relations between the sexes; and how to inculcate healthy and sane rules regarding courtship and marriage, that would allow the younger generation to live harmoniously within democratic and open societies.”

The author, having shared a portion of the Introduction, ended with these words:

“It is for the sake of young Muslims living in the West that I decided to write ‘The Muslim in the West,’ armed with my knowledge of Islam, its history, having lived around twenty years in Syria and Lebanon; and for the last forty years, in various Western lands. How I wish that those Muslims now living in the West could free themselves from those mediaeval and antiquated traditions, and bring about an open, modern, and civilized Islam.”

The Introduction to “The Muslim in the West” in its stark presentation of the cultural milieu that is operative in Muslim societies, makes it easy to understand why any Muslim, whether young or old, might experience intellectual and emotional turmoil in varying degrees when living in Western societies. Freedom, while liberating to most people, for many Muslims is fraught with fearful possibilities to them personally, as well as causing complications in their belief system. Islam has difficulty tolerating other religions, even in the West where it must do so. The author laments the plight of young Muslims particularly, who, even though born in the West, are not always willing to accept its freedom, equality and tolerance. His desire for them is to free themselves from their religion’s outmoded traditions and evil practices and strive to make it “open, modern and civilized.”

Missing in the “Introduction” was any reference to the root cause of many of the problems experienced by Muslims everywhere as they interact with the “Other.” That root cause resides in the sacred and authoritative texts of Islam themselves: the Qur’an, Hadith, and Sirat (Life of the Prophet.) History has shown how those attempting to enforce such teachings on unbelievers have wrought havoc to their souls and bodies. Examples are too many to even list, but 9-11 comes to mind for Americans, and every day in Africa, and the Middle East unbelievers, particularly Christians, are subject to violence and death. It is to be hoped that the author would have covered this in the body of the book.

Another aspect of Islam was brought into play about a month after the original article appeared when this telling response to it, was posted on al-Awan's website:

"The problem of young Muslims living in the West is very complex. For them, Islam remains both a national and a religious identity. They have inherited a simplistic and illogical outlook on life from their parents, who are basically illiterate immigrants. Most of them belonged to the poor classes in their original homelands and are thus a fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamist positions."

Indeed, how true this is. "Islam remains both a national and a religious identity" for all Muslims wherever they settle outside Daru'l Islam. This basic fact is highlighted Bernard Lewis' observation:

"For the Muslim, religion was the core of identity, of his own and therefore of other men's. The civilized world consisted of the House of Islam, in which a Muslim government ruled, Muslim law prevailed, and non-Muslim communities might enjoy the tolerance of the Muslim state and community provided they accepted the conditions. The basic distinction between themselves and the outside world was the acceptance or rejection of the message of Islam. ... The real difference was religion. Those who professed Islam were called Muslims and were part of God's community, no matter in which country or under what sovereign they lived. Those who rejected Islam were infidels. The Arabic word is kafir, from a root meaning to disbelieve or deny, normally used only of those who disbelieve in the Islamic message and deny its truth.<sup>ii</sup>"

If Muslim immigrants and their children born in the West, continue to regard Islam as the core and basis of their identity, they will find it difficult to become fully integrated into the West's liberal democracies, whether in Europe or in America. At the very least, they need to come to terms with the concept of toleration of the religious beliefs of the "Other." Likewise, they need to interact with the "infidels" in their new homelands with all due respect. They have every right in these lands to propagate their faith. But so, do others have reciprocal rights to propagate different faiths. There is much that needs to happen before things get better.

Too many mosques have Imams who preach hate at the Friday prayer services. Not much has changed over the years from when I used to listen on short wave radio to the Friday sermons from North African or Middle Eastern lands. Then, as now, the contents of these "khutbahs" (official message of the Imam) tended to be mostly political, rather than mainly religious or moral. Reformist Muslim intellectuals draw our attention to the problems that accompany Muslims who have settled in the West, and how change is urgently needed. Yet they remain unable to bring about any major reform of the Islamic homelands, where intolerance and radicalism is on the rise. Thus, if Islamic houses of worship in the West keep "importing" radical Imams from these places, we can expect slight change in the situation among the Muslims in Europe and America. They will remain alienated and prone to intolerance of the "Other." This is now extremely important, as some Muslims have entered the political life, and have levelled unwarranted criticisms against citizens of other beliefs! One can still hope that someday, a more grateful attitude will be exhibited by Muslim youths toward the countries that first welcomed their parents and gave them employment and freedom to practice their religion in peace.

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<sup>i</sup> (Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1982, pp. 66-67)

<sup>ii</sup> (*Ibid.*, pp.171-172)