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Multiculturalism in Europe

In Europe, multiculturalism can be analyzed at two different levels. At the level of daily life, it has become a matter of irreversible diversity and in that respect, it cannot be put into question. Even in France where the successive scarf issues have ended up in excluding the scarf from the public places (government schools but also the administration in general and many other semi-governmental institutions), there are tightly knit scarves in many poor suburbs and living places of orthodox Muslim populations.

Another level is that of the public opinion and institutional decision making bodies (parliaments, municipalities, public administrations etc.). Here, there is a deep crisis of multiculturalism after September the 11th, bombings in London as well as the killing of Theo Van Gogh and the Madrid Bombings. The two major countries where multicultural policies are part of the government policies, The United Kingdom and Holland, are putting it into question in its many different aspects.

In the public opinion, the so-called question of Islamic fundamentalism is becoming one of the most debated topics in Europe.

-The daily life level

In spite of the banning of the veil in the public institutions in France, partly in reaction to it and partly because of the development of new communities in France, in many suburbs and Muslim districts (places where sizeable number of Muslims live) the veil has become a part of the clothing of orthodox Muslim women.

This is certainly not a phenomenon related to multiculturalism since many people resent this attitude of the Muslims and from their perspective, wearing the veil or the "Qamis" (the traditional cloth of some Muslim groups) or having a beard is synonymous with the rejection of "integration" into the French society. This view of the Islamic clothing is nowadays much more widespread among many European citizens than before the September the 11th and the Madrid and London bombings of 2004 and 2005. Some groups of Muslims, in their turn, build up "safe heavens" where they can attend to their daily prayers and live according to their orthodox view of the religion which is viewed by many non Muslim citizens as "fundamentalist".

There is an increased rigidity regarding Islamic religious practices among the Europeans. In England, the veil issue has become public and many people push towards some legislation in order to prohibit the use of the veil in public places or government bodies. In Holland, the most restrictive law against the law is being discussed and if approved, the veil will become illegal in the public sphere. In Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, veil is more and more is seen as a sign of rejection of the citizenship and in many German Länder and in Switzerland, female teachers cannot wear a scarf at school.

In France, the veil is practically banned not only at government schools (école publique), but also in the public administration.

There is a suspicious attitude on the part of many politicians which is the consequence of the European societies' increasing stiffness towards Islamic identity.

-The institutional level

The legal banning of veil from government schools in France and by extension, from the institutions creates a situation where every woman wearing the hijab (be it a simple scarf or a total niqab) is suspected of "fundamentalism" (or "intégrisme"). This induces a kind of rift between the orthodox Muslims and the other citizens, contributing to the former's closing ranks and living in closed knit local communities. This, in turn,

induces the accusation of "communalism" (communautarisme), that is, refusal to become full fledged members of the French nation. This attitude, which was peculiarly French has now become much more general throughout Europe and in many officially multiculturalist countries like England and Holland, there are debates putting into question the former attitude of tolerance and promoting restrictions.

The vicious circle sets in: the more restrictions on the Islamic identity are promulgated, the more minority groups of Muslims close ranks to live in closed circles in order to protect themselves from the disintegrating effect of the public policies and the more they are exposed to the grievance of the other citizens of refusing to become integrated citizens.

The new Muslim actors

Three groups of Muslims seem to be active.

The first group which is an active minority believes that Muslims have to adhere publicly to the democratic tenets of Europe and neutralize the angers and the anxieties of the majority of the European citizens by promoting inter-faith dialogue, denouncing Islamic radicalism and discussing the controversial issues.

The second group is the "silent majority" which is exposed to more islamophobia and social prejudices in its daily life. Members of this group have to cope with what they believe to be Islamic orthodoxy and which, from the public view is identified with "fundamentalism". Controversial issues related to the Islamic identity of this group will probably be dealt with in tribunals or in the public sphere in the future

The third group is composed of a tiny minority of Muslims who might undergo either radicalisation or getting enclosed in more and more stigmatized enclaves. The economic situation of the excluded groups adds up to the problem, promoting ghettos and radicalisation.

A new type of public policy and interfaith dialogue should be encouraged in order to fight against radicalisation and the constitution of enclaves. The major problem in most European societies is that secularization is becoming so dominant that "interfaith dialogue" seems to lose much of its significance. Instead, some kind of "democratic dialogue with Islam" should set in.