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FINANCE & ECONOMICS

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Jun 22nd 2006

From *The Economist* print edition**Why so many Muslims find it easier to be American than to feel European**

Reuters



HAVING narrowly escaped with his life from the theocrats of his native Iran, Afshin Ellian likes the relaxed, cerebral atmosphere of Leiden, the Dutch town where he now teaches law. But this 40-year-old professor is disillusioned by a Europe which he says has become too soft-minded in its dealings with Islam. It is a sign of the times, he thinks, that the country where he settled 17 years ago is about to say goodbye to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Dutch politician who has sharply criticised the Muslim tradition in which she was raised. Having got into trouble because she once fibbed to the Dutch immigration authorities, Miss Hirsi Ali is moving to America.

Some of Mr Ellian's criticisms of Europe are philosophical: it is too cynical and mercantilist a place to

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wage a war of ideas in defence of the Enlightenment. Some are personal: "Five years ago, my Afghan sister-in-law emigrated to the United States, where she now works, pays taxes and takes part in public life. If she had turned up in Europe, she would still be undergoing treatment from social workers for her trauma—and she still wouldn't have got a job or won acceptance as a citizen."

Among Europeans of Middle Eastern heritage, Mr Ellian's views are rather unusual. But they would draw applause from many Europe-watchers in the United States, in whose eyes the mishandling of Islam has become the latest and gravest of Europe's self-inflicted wounds.

During the cold war, America used to berate its European friends for underestimating the Soviet threat and failing to spend enough money on their own defence. A little later, Europe was rightly scolded for not doing enough to stop the bloodshed in its own Balkan backyard. These days, the handling of Islam is near the top of the long list of subjects on which the American consensus differs sharply, and increasingly, from the European one.

A different view

Two recent events have crystallised American views. Late last year, when Muslims in many of France's slum-suburbs erupted in almost uncontrollable violence, this was seen as proof of Europe's failure either to give the newcomers a decent economic life or to confront extremism successfully. Then, earlier this year, Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad caused worldwide riots. This was a sign both of official Europe's weakness in defence of free speech—but also, for some Americans, of a godless continent's failure to understand the depth of other people's faith.

In running their economies, observes Charles Kupchan,



(Amazon.co.uk), "When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and the United States", by Jocelyne Cesari (Amazon.co.uk); "No god but God", by Reza Aslan (Amazon.co.uk).

Euro-Islam.info, was set up by leading academics to provide analysis of the impact of Islam on Europe. Afshin Ellian airs his views via a blog. Daniel Benjamin of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and Daniel Fried, America's Assistant Secretary of State, testified at a Senate foreign relations committee hearing on Islamic extremism in Europe. The Pew Research Centre published a poll on how Muslims and Westerners view each other.

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one of Washington's veteran Europe-watchers, the Europeans know what is needed but lack the firmness to do the right thing. When it comes to Islam, they just don't know what to do.

It does not cheer America that, in several parts of Europe, some Muslims have found a political voice in alliance with the anti-establishment left. Britain's "Stop the War" movement, which organised huge rallies against the war on Saddam Hussein's regime, is a curious partnership between supporters of the international Muslim Brotherhood and largely non-believing socialists. Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss-based scholar who has also taught at Oxford University, has won a large following with his mixture of loyalty to Islam's holy texts and opposition to global capitalism.

In some transatlantic squabbles, the American message has been delivered more in sorrow than in anger. We wish you Europeans would do the right thing (about labour markets, say, or farm subsidies) both for your own sake and for the sake of the global economy—but in the end it will be your loss if you don't. But when it comes to the handling of radical Islam, the argument is getting more rancorous. That is partly because Americans see a threat to their own security from a Europe whose citizens can travel easily to the United States. The September 2001 attacks, remember, were planned in Hamburg.

Europe has become a "field of *jihad*", and it may be the part of the world where America faces the greatest threat from Islamic extremism. So says Daniel Benjamin, a former White House adviser who is now a terrorism-watcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank. Mr Benjamin makes a demographic projection of a kind more often heard on American lips than European ones. The Muslim population of the European Union's existing 25 members may on present trends double from about 15m now to 30m by 2025. And that leaves out EU-applicant Turkey, with an almost entirely Muslim population of around 70m.

To be sure, it is by no means clear just how many Muslims there are in Europe. In France, whose secular authorities never ask a religious question on a census form, the number of people of Muslim heritage is generally given as 5m, or 8% of the population. But that is only an educated guess. Some studies, extrapolating from the difference in birth rates, say the figure might rise to 20% of the population by 2020.

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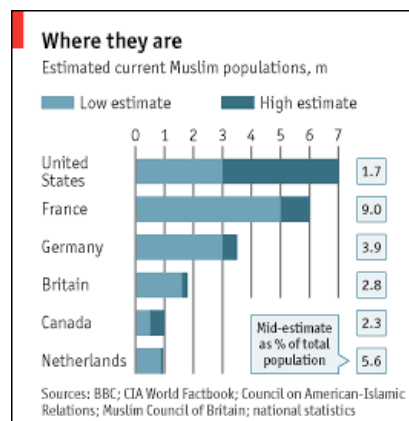
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Well, maybe. In a forthcoming book, two scholars at America's Brookings Institution, Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse, say this estimate is much too high. It underestimates the relative fecundity of non-Muslim Frenchwomen (compared with, say, their Italian sisters) and the fact that Muslims seem to have fewer babies the longer they have been in France.

In fact, there is something weirdly paradoxical about the Muslim scene in every major European country. The secular French state has given mosques and clerics a privileged role as representatives of Islam; yet France's Muslims are as lax in attending their mosques as Catholics are about going to church (though Muslims are better at private prayer and observing religious fasts).

In Germany, the great majority of the country's Muslims have their origin in Turkey. German Turks tell pollsters that they are happy with their host country, and with the principle of separation of church and state; but they also seem to be growing more fervent in their attachment to Islam. In one survey of German Turks, 83% said they were "rather" or "strictly" religious, and the number of those who think women should cover their head is rising.

Britain's authorities, both national and local, have devoted much attention to making the country's nearly 2m Muslims feel more at home. But Muslims remain at the bottom of the economic pile. The main reason is that, compared with British Hindus and Sikhs, or even French Muslim women, very few of Britain's Muslim women—mostly from Pakistan or Bangladesh—go out to work. Yet some Muslim sub-groups, such as the Ismailis who came from southern Asia via East Africa, have soared ahead. Islam itself is no barrier to economic advancement.



Amid all the confusion, there is one clear trend among European Muslims. Islam is increasingly important as a symbol of identity. About a third of French schoolchildren of Muslim origin see their faith rather than a passport or skin colour as the main thing that defines them. Young British Muslims are inclined to see Islam (rather than

the United Kingdom, or the city where they live) as their

true home.

It does not help that all Europeans, whatever their origin, nowadays find themselves “identity-shopping” as the European Union competes with the older nation-states for their loyalty. No wonder many young European Muslims find that the *umma*—worldwide Islam—tugs hardest at their heart-strings.

The argument gets blunter

In the short run, at least, there seems little chance of Europeans and Americans finding a common language over Islam. As many non-Muslim Europeans see things, it is American foreign policy—in Iraq, above all—that has radicalised their Muslim compatriots. If European Muslims are anti-Western, they say, it is largely because of the Bush administration's misdeeds.

In its gentler moments, the administration is sensitive to European touchiness. Americans must be “careful and modest” in telling other parts of the world how to solve questions of identity and religion, says Daniel Fried, the State Department's top man for European affairs.

But, in his careful, modest way, Mr Fried makes some firm points about Europe's difficulties in absorbing Muslim newcomers. Europeans, he thinks, are still too inclined to see these Muslims as “unwanted foreigners”. In facing a challenge like Muslim immigration, “exclusionary nationalism will not help.” At the same time, Mr Fried fears, some European governments are not very adept at distinguishing between peaceful piety and the more violent kind. He insists that the United States has a “deep and legitimate interest” in the battle of ideas between Islam's moderates and extremists in all parts of the world—and that it will do its best to support the moderate ones in Europe.

Yet, for Europe's angriest Muslims, their host countries' gravest sin lies precisely in their alignment with America—both as partners in the global capitalist system and as supporters, in varying degrees, of American foreign policy. So the suggestion that America may have something to teach Europe about how to make Muslims feel more comfortable (and therefore less extreme) looks at first sight rather strange.

It is, in fact, by no means absurd. Whatever the defects in Muslim eyes of American foreign policy, the United States has a substantial Muslim population which on the whole seems pretty comfortable there, and has produced some of the world's best Islamic thinkers. That

spectacular Middle East-looking mosque at the top of this article is in fact in Dearborn, Michigan.

For the same reason as in France—the fact that the state does not like asking questions about religion—the United States has a hard time estimating the size of its Muslim population: the guesses range between 3m and 7m. But, whatever the precise number, America's Muslims neither see themselves, nor are seen by other Americans, as being radically at odds with American society. When Americans scold Europe for its “exclusionary nationalism”, it is partly because they feel that their country has more successfully embraced a variety of religions, including Islam.

Some American Muslims would quibble with that claim: polls show a rising percentage of Americans with negative views about Islam, and Muslim organisations report a rising number of incidents of harassment or discrimination. But, broadly speaking, freedom to practise and preach Islam is protected by the American system.

If America is better at absorbing its Muslims, this may to some degree be a matter of luck. The majority of Muslim Americans are either upwardly mobile migrants from southern Asia or Iran, or black American converts who lack any personal links to Islam's heartland. Many European cities, on the other hand, contain an exceptionally volatile Muslim under-class which is poor, alienated and intertwined (by family ties) with the hungriest and angriest parts of the Muslim world.

But it is not just luck. The difference between America and Europe in dealing with Islam reaches down to some basic questions of principle, such as the limits of free speech and free behaviour. America's political culture places huge importance on the right to religious difference, including the right to displays of faith which others might consider eccentric. In the words of Reza Aslan, a popular Iranian-American writer on Islam, “Americans are used to exuberant displays of religiosity.” So the daily prostrations of a devout Muslim are less shocking to an American than to a lukewarm European Christian. American society is open to religious arguments—and to new approaches to old theological questions—in a way that Europe is not.

In general, Americans are more optimistic—or less gloomy—about Islam than Europeans. A poll published this week by the Pew Research Centre says that Americans who see Muslim-Western relations as

"generally bad" outnumber those who take the opposite view by 55% to 32%. Not exactly cheery. But in Germany the pessimists are ahead by 70% to 23%, in France by 66% to 33%, and in Britain by 61% to 28%.

Some things are off-limits even in America. In Britain, for example, members of the radical (but non-violent) Hizb ut-Tahrir movement have appeared on television to express their rejection of the principles of liberal democracy and secular justice. That is unlikely to happen in America. Nor would it be possible, in any American context, to argue for the superiority of *sharia*—Islamic law—over laws passed by elected law-makers.

But the right to say almost anything on most other subjects is deeply entrenched in America. This means that, whatever weapons the parties in America's religious arguments try to use, they do not usually include attempts to deny the other side's right to speak.

The result is that there is more space for hard religious argument. No law restrains that quite large body of American thought which is critical not just of extreme readings of Islam but of Islam itself—arguing that the warrior ethos of the faith's earlier centuries was one of its essential features, not just a regrettable excess. But the American system also guarantees the rights of those who argue for the opposite view: that Islam is basically a peaceful, universalist faith which restricts rather than enjoins the use of violence.

This does not mean that America has a monopoly of wisdom in distinguishing peaceful Muslim citizens from the other sort. During the 1990s, a Washington-based group called the American Muslim Council and its leader, Abdurahman Alamoudi, were hailed by the American government as valuable people to talk to. In 2004, Mr Alamoudi was given a 23-year jail term on terrorism-related charges.

But one merit of the American system is that, even when hard questions arise about the trade-off between freedom of speech and security, there is a robust legal culture which enables people to fight back if their rights are infringed. Last year some American Muslims who had been detained in New York state on returning from a conference in Canada promptly filed a lawsuit against the federal authorities—and they were helped to do so by the American Civil Liberties Union.

The idea that freedom is the cornerstone of politics is

one reason why people like Mr Ellian, that Iranian who fled to Leiden, look hopefully towards America. His argument goes as follows. Islam's sacred texts can be read either in a spirit of militant intolerance or in a spirit of altruism—and the latter can prevail only in conditions of hard, open-ended debate in which nobody holds back for fear of giving offence. America's free-speech culture may have a better chance of fostering such a debate than European political correctness.

It's starting to change

There is no shortage of robust debate among European Muslims, but it is more about politics—especially left-wing politics—than about theology. In Belgium, Muslims now have about a quarter of the seats in the regional government of Brussels. In the municipal politics of Britain and the Netherlands, some radical Muslims quite often find themselves doing political business with other anti-establishment groups on the secular left, to the dismay of older immigrants.

During a recent contest in east London, the candidate for the new Respect party—a young Muslim lawyer—was chided by his co-religionists for sharing a platform with homosexuals. But Abdurahman Jafar held his ground: “We want equality for Muslims and we would seem insincere if we didn't stand together with other minorities who face discrimination.”

The rhetoric that emerges from this sort of politics in a variety of European countries is not always attractive to American ears, since one of the few common denominators between angry Muslims and secular leftists is hostility to America. But, given a choice between pious self-segregation and plunging into public affairs, many European Muslims are choosing the latter.

In places like Amsterdam, coalition-building between Muslims and others is producing some positive results. Ahmed Aboutaleb, a Moroccan-born city councillor in Amsterdam, is proud of the fact that he was handsomely re-elected this year—on a moderate centre-left ticket—by a combination of native Dutch votes as well as those of Muslim immigrants.

He says that the relatively benign inter-ethnic climate in Amsterdam reflects the town hall's efforts to make all races and religions feel part of a “united camp”. As a result, he claims, the risk of some new incident setting off a general upsurge of tit-for-tat violence between Christians and Muslims (as happened when the filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim

extremist in 2004) has been greatly reduced, at any rate in Amsterdam (though he admits the risk is still rather higher in other Dutch cities).

Of course, this does not mean that there is no longer any cause to feel concern about Europe's ability to absorb its assorted Muslim peoples. The latest study of the 900,000 Dutch Muslims, by Amsterdam University, suggests that the feelings of "indignation and humiliation" experienced by Muslims are worsening, not fading away. Such feelings are especially strong among second-generation Muslims, who believe they have a solid claim to a comfortable place in Dutch society but still reckon they are being rejected.

The good news is that not everybody who harbours these feelings is retreating into the margins of extremism and violence. A process of political assimilation is, hesitantly but visibly, taking place. This will change the politics of Europe. It may affect Europe's relations with the outside world. But, in the process, Muslims will also change—and perhaps settle into their new homelands as comfortably as most American Muslims have done.

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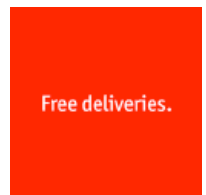
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