

Europe can feel at home with 16m Muslims

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When Italians immigrated to France in the late 19th century, many French believed these often undereducated, religious newcomers would never integrate. Some Italians were killed in race riots, write Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse in their book *Integrating Islam**. Later, Portuguese, Polish or Jewish immigrants were deemed "unable to integrate" into France, but they did.

Now the European Union's 16m or so Muslims are often considered unassimilable. Fifty years after they began arriving in Europe, their rates of joblessness and incarceration remain high. A very small number are fundamentalist terrorists, as in the recently foiled plot in Germany. Muslims also traditionally have more children than native Europeans. Hence the American neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz, in his new book**, predicts that western Europe will be "conquered from within by Islamofascism".

Yet the [Financial Times' recent series of articles on Muslims in Europe](#) showed nothing of the kind. We found that most concerns about Europe's Muslims were overblown – despite the terrorists – and in time may fade like those ancient fears of Italians.

It is true that Muslims on average perform worse in schools and on the job market than native Europeans. Some American writers such as Walter Laqueur contrast this with the success of Jewish immigrants a century ago. However, that comparison is flawed. The Jews were arriving in countries where few natives had gone beyond primary school. There was no educational gap. The Muslims landed in an unprecedentedly educated Europe. It would be astounding if children of often illiterate immigrants closed that gap in one generation, but some do.

Nor do many Muslims seek Europe's destruction. When the US State department polled French Muslims in 2005, for example, 95 per cent expressed a favourable overall opinion of France. In the Netherlands, surveys also show overwhelming contentment.

That Muslims are grinding out babies ready to take over Europe is an outdated canard. Mr Laqueur worries about declining European fertility, but the Muslim decline is sharper. In 1970 Algerian and Moroccan women averaged about seven children each. Now they have fewer than three. America's Central Intelligence Agency even estimates the Algerian, Turkish and Tunisian figure at below two, lower than France's. The Parisian demographers Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd demonstrate in their new book*** that after most men in a country become literate, the fertility rate falls.

In consequence, a composite profile of the average continental European Muslim today looks something like this: he has two or three children, who go to non-religious schools. He is relatively poor but generally content, though angry about discrimination. He feels more religious than a decade ago, but opposes terrorism and does not know any terrorists, though he probably knows sympathisers. His political concerns are domestic.

British Muslims are slightly different. They are the ones, in Europe, most likely to condone jihad and to worry about foreign policy. This may be a consequence of Britain going to war in Iraq or of British multiculturalism.

Perhaps a few thousand European Muslims are tempted by terrorism. Native converts to Islam appear overrepresented among them. Europe must catch these people, without getting hysterical: rather more Europeans still die of smoking than from Islamic fundamentalism. Nor does history suggest that Islam is a uniquely violent religion. That proposition would have baffled anyone surveying the ruins of Europe in 1648 or 1918 or 1945.

Here are three suggestions to help European Muslims integrate. First, abolish housing segregation. It is hard to become British or French if you are planted in a ghetto where you never meet natives. Second, make immigrants learn the native language. It is the only essential business tool. Third, the authorities should not worry about changing people's thoughts. People can support any cricket team, or believe whatever they like about gays, as long as they obey the law. The worst way to make people feel integrated is to keep demanding that they integrate.

We must not regard Islam in Europe as eternally indigestible. In Dreux outside Paris, I met a woman who worked in local government, spoke impeccable French and had histories of Christianity in her bookcase. Born in Casablanca to an illiterate mother, she considered herself of immigrant origin, but said her children, who spoke only French to her, were French "full stop". "We have lives like everyone else's," she said. "We have a barbecue, some people don't eat certain things. It's a normal life." That goes for most of the 16m.

*Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France (Brookings Institution Press, 2006) **World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism (Doubleday, 2007) ***Le rendez-vous des civilisations (Seuil, September 2007)

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