

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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p a r t f i v e

Islam and Policy in Central Europe

Muslim Minorities and Czech Society

Jiří Schneider

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Muslim Minorities and Czech Society

Jiří Schneider

Crossing the Charles Bridge in Prague ■ Mark Helnley, Panos

European events including the Madrid and London terrorist attacks, debate on Turkey's future accession to the European Union, and interethnic tensions in the Netherlands have dramatically changed the way Central Europeans perceive issues related to Islam and Muslims. Although clashes with Muslim minorities in Central Europe are more ideological than actual, themes related to Muslims currently serve as a symbolic playground for a wide range of social fears and frustrations.

Czechs, among the most secular Europeans, have only recently encountered Muslims as neighbors through immigration. During the Cold War, Czech borders as well as the borders of other Soviet bloc countries were closed to Muslim migration. Within this context of shock therapy in cultural diversity, the sharpness of Czech public debates and media coverage on issues related to Islam and Muslims often does not correlate with the scale of real problems on the ground, which tend to concentrate on rather mundane and practical questions about how to better accommodate the everyday life of the Muslim community.

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Muslim minority as a new phenomenon

In relation to populations in many other countries of the European Union, the Muslim community in the Czech Republic is incomparably tiny (approximately 20,000, with some 400 Czech converts among 10 million inhabitants). Nevertheless, the number of Muslims in the Czech Republic has doubled in the past decade and is projected to continue based on the rate

that can be extrapolated onto future growth as the country has opened its borders, with most immigrants coming from Arab countries, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Most Czechs first confronted visible signs of difference such as women wearing veils during the 1990s, when hundreds of Muslim refugees fleeing Balkan wars moved to the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the Muslim community was not a particularly visible minority and religious differences were not the subject of public dialogue. The primary reason for the relatively rosy state of affairs in the 1990s was the fact that most Muslim immigrants came from the former Yugoslavia and were regarded by the majority population as familiar in terms of both ethnicity and their highly secularized and urbanized lifestyle.

Major points of contention: Islamic centers and registration

Today, several thousand Muslims who are permanent Czech residents or citizens live mostly in big cities. A mosque has yet to be built in the country, and the question of whether to build one has proven extremely contentious in public debates. Muslims have the facilities to gather for worship only in the major urban centers of Prague and Brno. Past attempts to obtain municipality approval for the construction of Islamic centers (for example in various spa locations such as Teplice, Karviná-Darkov, Orlová) have sparked heated public debates about Czech Muslim communities which have awakened and divided local constituencies. All bids except those in Prague and Brno have been denied. In several cases, petitions, polls and public hearings were organized.

Virtually no Czech public administrators have experience working with Muslims, so they seek the advice of other religious representatives as “experts” on Islam—a tactic which has further polarized religious communities and congregations. Expressions of tolerance and solidarity (for example one Christian community



Astrological clock, Prague

has offered their chapel to Muslims for prayers) are countered with clear signs of intolerance and bigotry (such as Christian leaders characterizing Europe as a frontline of global conflict and fortress protecting the West from the expansion of Islam).

Although the Czech Constitution guarantees full freedom of religion and religious association, Czech legislation does not provide for a full separation of church (or mosque) and state. To be eligible for state subsidies, religious associations must be registered, and in order to be registered, they must gather petitions from more than 10,000 members (or roughly half of the entire population of the Muslim community in the Czech Republic!). The practical implementation of the rules has been highly discriminatory, since most recognized organizations have fewer members than required, while the Czech Muslim community was unable to complete a petition list and remained a mere citizens' association until it was finally registered in October 2004.

Interestingly, in December 2004 Czech Buddhist Olga Ryantova submitted a petition requesting that the official registration of the Muslim community be reconsidered. The petition included quotations from the Koran implying that Islam is incompatible with human rights and explicitly promotes violence. Similar activities have reportedly been conducted recently by groups related to the Buddhist Diamond Way (Lama Ole Nydahl) in Denmark, Germany and France. To date there has been no official Czech reaction to the petition.

The debate: principal channels and actors

The primary source of information and main forum for Czech debate on issues related to Islam and Muslims is the internet and various discussion groups. The debate is not edited or obviously censored and is generally poorly informed, polarized, emotionally loaded, often aggressive and prejudiced. A worrisome feature of relevant internet-based debates is that, although limited in terms of numbers of participants, their relative anonymity attracts obscure and potentially dangerous extremists.

The anti-Islam camp in the Czech Republic involves Euro-skeptics of all sorts, evangelical Christian fundamentalists, secular liberal feminists, Roman-Catholic traditionalists, opponents of Turkish EU membership, proponents of the separation of church and state who view Islam as a religion of governance, etc. For the sake of illustration, the list below is a combination of opinions proclaimed by the Conservative Club (http://www.konzervativniklub.cz/index_en.php), which tend to promote



Old Town square, Prague

a greater public role for religion, pro-life policies (similar to the Religious Right in the United States), the punishment of wrongdoings after World War I (reconciliation with Germany), and support for Israel. Common arguments tend to be articulated as follows:

- Islamic centers might become hotbeds of terrorism, providing foundations for its financing and logistics,
- Center pulpits would be misused to instigate religious intolerance and violent *jihad*,
- Islam is a synonym for the subordination of women and gender inequality,
- Any concession to the comprehensive aspirations of Islam or giving up general secular jurisdiction would create a parallel Muslim society, and
- Turkish membership in the EU would enable the “Islamization” of Europe.

Islam is defended by official and private Muslim websites (<http://www.muslim-inform.cz/>, <http://www.islam.wz.cz/>, <http://www.islamweb.cz/>, <http://ablecd.wz.cz/darkside/>). Although they sometimes serve to feed prejudice among critics by promoting open intolerance, hatred and extremism, most of the Czech Muslim websites and contributions promote tolerance and understanding along the lines of the following:

- Christianity, Islam and Judaism share a principal kinship with a common origin (Abraham) and scriptural character of tradition
- Better understanding of diverse cultures would enable Czech society to embrace global opportunities.

Some Czech non-governmental organizations include the promotion of tolerance as an inherent component of their mission. The following examples are selected projects that counter intolerance and promote reconciliation:

- Intercultural Education Project “Variants” (<http://www.varianty.cz/>) was created in 2002 by non-governmental organization People in Need with the support of EU Phare Program. The project develops tools for high-school education based on respect, equality and diversity, specifically addressing tolerance towards Islam by developing a syllabus including an excellent chapter on Islam using real experiences from Czech Muslims.
- Forum 2000: Bridging the Gaps (<http://www.forum2000.cz/>) is an umbrella project established by Vaclav Havel in 1997 which aims to bring together representatives of various streams of thinking and perspectives. Notably it has created the tradition of an annual multi-religious assembly with the representatives of several religions including Islam (http://www.forum2000.cz/projects/multireligious_assembly.php). Though positive in its ambition to spark inter-religious dialogue, it has involved mostly top brass international personalities and has failed to have the anticipated impact on local relations to Muslim communities.

- Prague Multicultural Center (<http://www.mkc.cz/>) is an NGO supported by a broad portfolio of sponsors. Its activities include education, public debate, media monitoring, etc. MCP organized a series of roundtables on the position of women in different cultural and religious frameworks including Islam.
- Youth for Intercultural Understanding (<http://www.osmip.cz>) was founded in 1998 in Brno by a group of young people who wanted to contribute actively to the process of understanding diverse cultures both “inside” or “outside” Czech society. So far the organization has not addressed the issue of Islam.

Prospects for the future: Media, NGOs, citizens and open dialogue

Due to its multifaceted character, serious public debate on the value-laden issue of Czech relations toward Islam and Muslims requires informed attitudes and the active engagement of knowledgeable individuals unafraid to speak up and argue. It is clear that certain Czech regulations are discriminatory in practice toward Muslims as well as other ‘new’ religious groups, and these regulations should be reviewed. Less anonymity and more publicity would certainly help to cultivate the debate, which the mainstream media has largely avoided.

One of the key dilemmas for any liberal society is how to conduct a fair and open discourse on critical issues without being labeled as politically incorrect or even extremist, targeted by accusations, harassed or threatened with violence. For a healthy debate to take place, those participating must be assured that their freedom of expression will be safeguarded by state authorities (politicians, law enforcement and judiciary) in the face of threats. Violence motivated or justified by religion should be unequivocally and publicly condemned and denounced, just as in cases involving hate crimes, as such violence undermines the foundations of tolerance. As long as religious incitement to violence exists, it would be unwise to claim that we can deal with it in a strictly secularized discourse. Politicians, public intellectuals, clerics, and celebrities must be invited as citizens to set a benchmark for open and substantive dialogue.



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.