The tensions between Muslim identity and Western citizenship

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'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.
'I don't much care where--' said Alice.
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

I wish to make the claim that no matter their political hue, British governments have, for decades, adopted an 'Alice in Wonderland' approach to migrant settlers. That is to say, like Alice they have not cared much about where they want to get to with regards to forging some kind of common citizenship. At least until recent years when some importance has been put on improving social or community cohesion and attention paid to factors which are deemed to comprise 'Britishness'.

In stark contrast, community and religious 'leaders' and 'elders' from some religious-ethnic minority groups have been very clear as to where they want to get to: the granting of resources, rights, separate laws, and exemptions to the law for their respective 'communities'. In this endeavour they have been greatly assisted by the academy whose theories and ideas have coalesced under the rubric of 'multiculturalism'. At its heart, this is the stress on acknowledging, respecting and showing 'recognition' of the differences in culture and religion between different communities and, thereby, the breaching of universalism. Unwittingly and aimlessly, this came to be adopted by national and local governments. Indeed the previous Labour government began to think of Britain as a 'multi-faith' society, an epithet implicitly acknowledged by the present Coalition government with its appointment – a first – of a Minister for Faith and Communities (whereas other European have, more sensibly, Ministers for Integration) so that there seemed to be a seamless transformation from multiculturalism to multifaithism.

Multiculturalism and multifaithism are the outcomes of cultural relativism and attendant cultural and religious *laissez faire* whereby there has been the absence of any attempt to forge commonalities. Separatism and segregation have been the inevitable outcomes; indeed what has arisen in towns and cities across the country are ghettoised 'monocultural' and 'monofaith' neighbourhoods where mixing with those not of the same religious-ethnic group is minimal or practically non-existent. This has poignantly been described by Ted Cantle as 'parallel lives'. A particularly disturbing aspect of this is the segregation of schools so that large numbers of children from 'faith communities' are marooned from the majority white society and indeed also from other ethnic groups.

Though there is no evidence to substantiate this, perhaps some politicians might be rather pleased by this dynamic as it potentially facilitates 'divide and rule' tactics and enables pork barrel politics to flourish with the attendant increasing grip of religious and community leaders on 'their' communities – an unfortunate and undesirable outcome.

Mono-faithism has particularly affected large numbers of Muslims – not just in Britain but throughout the Western world where they have settled in great numbers in the past three decades. It is curious in that in the so-called post-9/11 'Islamophobic' decade, the numbers of Muslims in Britain jumped from 3 percent of the population in 2001 to 4.8 per cent by the 2011census (an

astonishing 60 per cent increase). It is likely that millions more Muslims – with no concern for the 'Islamophobia' that is supposed to have afflicted the country – would like to settle in the UK given the chance.

In stark contrast, large numbers of citizens in Western countries have become concerned by the Muslim presence – it is important to stress that this has nothing to do with Islamophobia. This is evidenced by the British Social Attitudes survey of 2010 which highlighted the fact that of all the major religions in Britain, only Islam generated an overall negative response. Similarly, a Populus opinion poll in 2011, considered the largest survey into identity and extremism in the UK found that 52 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition that 'Muslims create problems in the UK' (a far higher percentage than for other religious groups).

Similar concerns are found in other European countries. In the Netherlands, long renowned for its tolerance and liberalism, a survey conducted by Paul Sniderman and Louk Hagendoorn in 1998, that is *before* 9/11 and the war on terror, showed that approximately half the Dutch population thought that 'Western European and Muslim ways of life are *irreconcilable'*. Some of the reasons for this irreconcilability include 'nine out of every ten agree that Muslim men in the Netherlands dominate their women … Three out of every four Dutch agree that Muslims in the Netherlands raise their children in an authoritarian way'. In a similar vein, in his acclaimed book on the Netherlands and its Muslim population, *Murder in Amsterdam,* Ian Buruma posits the following explanation for the sudden rise of Pim Fortuyn, the anti-Islamist academic and politician in 2001-02: 'Fortuyn's venom is drawn more from the fact that he, and millions of others, not just in the Netherlands, but all over Europe, had painfully wrested themselves free from the strictures of their own religions. And here were these newcomers injecting society with religion once again'.

Indeed, we can aver that this reasoning applies *a fortiori* to France given its strong secular constitution and centrality of *laïcité*. For example, in the debates on the proposed law that prohibits the wearing of religious symbols in schools (most notably, the *hijab*) there was overwhelming support for the legislation across the political spectrum (one opinion poll showed 72 per cent in favour).

The opinion of Germans accords with this as is evidenced by an opinion poll commissioned in 2012 by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to ascertain Germans' views of Muslims. Respondents were asked to choose which of 21 statements they were offered about Islam that most closely reflected their opinion: 83% thought that Islam is associated with impairing women's rights; 77% thought Islam was a literalist religion; 70% said Islam is associated with religious fanaticism and radicalism. A significant majority of Germany's population also believes that Islam is ready for violence (64%), hatred (60%), active missionary activity (56%), and striving for political influence (56%). Only 13% of respondents associate Islam with love for neighbours; 12% with charity; and 7% with openness and tolerance.

Matters are, unsurprisingly, no better in the United States. This is attested by a Gallup poll in January 2010 which showed that Islam is by far the most negatively viewed religion in America: 31 per cent view it as 'not favourable at all'; whilst 23 per cent view it as 'not too favourable' (the respective figures for Christians are 4 and 4 per cent and for Jews 15 and 10 per cent). Similarly, 43 per cent admit to feeling at least 'a little' prejudice towards Muslims – far more than the number who say the same about Christians (18%), Jews (15%) and Buddhists (14%). This theme was developed by Samuel Huntington in a work on American national identity (*Who Are We?*, 2005), which followed his controversial *Clash of Civilisations*. Huntington argues that: 'Muslims, particularly Arab Muslims, seem slow to assimilate ... The difficulties [regarding their assimilation] also may stem from the nature of Muslim culture. Elsewhere in the world, Muslim minorities have

proved to be "indigestible" by non-Muslim societies ... In some circumstances, the desire of Muslims to maintain the purity of their faith and the practices of their religion may lead to conflicts with non-Muslims'.

From the above very worrying poll findings, it would be mistaken to think that unease with many aspects of Islam and with those who espouse it is confined to the margins of society; on the contrary, it appears to be widespread. Accordingly, we cannot reasonably consider negative sentiments regarding Muslim beliefs and practices as being based on some generalised, irrational, Islamophobia – an epithet suffused with racial connotations given that most Muslims in the West are non-white; or on a wilful misunderstanding or ignorance of the religion as is invariably asserted by Islamists and their apologists.

What Huntington terms 'indigestible', I have analysed as 'psychic detachment' (in [Hasan](#), 2010). At its extreme it can be seen as immigrants' mode of thinking, belonging, living, as being rooted elsewhere: that is, their alienation from the host society is such that they might as well be living in another land. In turn, this engenders alienation among a very significant percentage of the host population. What is of urgent necessity, therefore, are measures to help Muslims (and indeed other religious-ethnic minority citizens) to break free from their isolation and segregation that is rife within 'faith communities' and fully integrate into societies into which they have chosen to settle.

The salutary goal of social cohesion requires a concerted inclusiveness into mainstream society, in both mental and material terms. But what is also of vital importance is the acknowledgment that a gradual withering away of 'faith identities' will enormously aid the cause of social justice, integration, and cohesion. Public policy, above all in regard to school education, can significantly rein in the artificial division engendered by religion, a task that is made inordinately easier as a consequence of the relentless decline in religious belief in Western societies (though significantly less so in the US) so that religious - that is, sectarian - identity has become largely irrelevant to the mass of the population. Northern Ireland's sectarian divisions are a sobering reminder of the path that must be avoided.

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