

Five Pillars to Build a More Inclusive Europe towards Islam

COMMENTARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 9 November 2020, European Council President Charles Michel called for the creation of a European institute to train imams as a way to curb hate speech and prevent terrorism. Following shortly after the gruesome religion-motivated murder on Samuel Paty in France and a terrorist attack in Vienna, Michel said he believes that a European institute for imams could help “to fight against extremist ideologies, violent extremism, messages of hatred, and messages of rejection that feed these terrorist actions.”

Since then, the situation and rhetoric has been gradually tuned down, allowing for some emotional distance and a fresh and unbiased perspective on a rather complex and multi-faceted issue.

Amongst the questions to be answered are whether Islamic values are compatible with those of the Western secular society; whether there is a limit on the amount of people from another religious and cultural background that can be absorbed in society; whether integration should be by force or by natural assimilation; how to break the cycle of social exclusion, bias, poverty and extremism; how to deal with

Islamism and political Islam; how to protect European Muslims against the import of hate-based dogmatic ideologies that undermine the pluralistic foundation of and harmony in Europe; and on a geopolitical level what should be the nature of the relationship and dialogue between the West and the Muslim world.

Rather than further steering up the polemic or providing more analysis and data, this article aims to provide some fresh ideas to shift the discussion from a “the fight against”-narrative and strategy towards one of “common vision, goals, understanding, plans...”. We do this in the form of five principles or “pillars”, in which we aim to transcend what are often perceived to be some of the most precious contradictions between Europe and Islam. For the observant reader they also include answers on the questions above. With it we hope to open space for a constructive dialogue and offer some new perspectives towards a European Islam that is as much European as it is Islamic.

One important factor when talking about European Islam is that Islam by nature is less strictly central and hierarchical organized (as for example the Catholic Church) but instead more dynamic, evolving over time, geographically, intellectually and in terms of influence it has on the Muslim world and society as a whole. Therefore it can be expected that a top-down approach to a European Islam might lead to scepticism and resistance. On the other hand, starting with a charter – based on the “pillars” as overviewed below – and having mosques and Islamic organizations pledge to them and implement them as to become role models to other mosques and organisations might be a more feasible approach.

1. There is no contradiction between Islam and secular democracy

Both the Quran (Surat 12: Joseph) and the Islamic tradition of the prophet, known as the Sunna (the migration to Abyssinia) teach that Muslims can perfectly live and thrive under different political conditions as long as they are not physically persecuted and prohibited to practice their faith. In this respect, we find that many Muslims have more freedom of religion in Europe than in their country of origin. In addition, there is a lot of effort from European governments towards Muslims and immigrants, for example, in the field of eliminating socio-economic deprivation, discrimination, racism and integration into society; again programs and opportunities that are often not offered in countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

The great thing about a secular democracy is that it does not force its citizens to agree on everything and welcomes the ideas and contributions of everyone. At its essence, democracy is the translation of the values of enlightenment into governance, where nobody is considered to have a monopoly on truth and power, where truth and value can be found in everyone, and that everyone's opinion should be treated with dignity and respect. As such nobody should denounce a political opponent as evil or illegitimate, just because they have different views. It invites to humbleness, listening, learning, dialogue, consultation and respect - all values that are at the essence of Islamic virtues.

Instead of seeing tensions and diversity as sources of conflicts, in a democracy they are considered as opportunities to uncover bias, find new insights and higher truths and as a result have society evolve in such a way that it maximizes the sustainable well-being and prosperity of its citizens based on justice, equality and truth.

For Muslims, such the ideal society is the theoretical "Abode-of-Peace", where society is governed through the embodiment of Truth, both in the behaviour/character of its citizens as in its institutions and systems. In other words, the goal of the 'ideal' Western and Islam society is actually the same.

Where many Muslims believe that these Truths can be directly derived from the Quran, Hadith and Sunna, a democracy puts the emphasis on a gradual and dynamic process that requires debate, active listening and dialectic discussion based on the desire to find principles, insights, knowledge and others that are able to transcend opposites and find higher truths. Or if that is not possible, at least identify and reaffirm what is held in common and compromise on the difference. If tensions cannot be resolved in a civilised way, there is the court. And if the court also fails to resolve tensions within society or if governance fails to bring prosperity and well-being to its citizens, there is democracy to change the laws and/or the governance.

While this approach to the 'ideal society' seems different, on closer look, Islam and Western democracy hold more in common than what sets them apart in the process of organizing and governing society. The Quran invites to compete with other (religions and believes) in virtue and in truth; to invite to dialogue in the best of manners, with wisdom and fairness; to argue with others in a way that is better;

and to be patience and tolerance in the case of ignorance and rejection. How is that not the very essence of the democracy process and dialectic dialogue, a meritocracy based on truth and virtue?

Historical it can even be argued that much of the decline of Islam was due to politically stifling of open discussion and exploration and replacing it with narrow dogmatic conformation. This at exactly the time Europe was starting to pick up its intellectual (and spiritual) wisdom and tradition that set-off the transfer of intellectual exploration, truth-finding and idealism from the Muslim world to the West and sparked the age of enlightenment.

2. The values of enlightenment and Islam can reinforce each other

Europe, and by extension the whole world, is certainly not without problems and challenges. Fault lines within society and between cultures, both locally and internationally, are increasing, widening and deepening: those between man and nature; between rich and poor; between young and old; between material saturation and spiritual poverty; between individualism and collectivism; between trust and distrust in institutions and governance; between financial debts and future wealth; between East and West; between technology and humanity; between word and deed; between prosperity and mental health; between conventional and post-convention... The list is endless.

On closer scrutiny it seems as if we have reached the limits of our socio-economic systems, with diminishing returns in our efforts and investments, and externalities potentially spiralling out of control into a world that is working for a decreasing amount of people at the expense of others, the future, whole-ecosystems and the environment and thus is leading to increasing tensions.

Civil society starts crumbling down when it fails in the civil handling of tensions through the democratic process. This inability can have many causes, such as when it is not able to provide answers to important issues that directly and indirectly affect the lives of its citizens; when its elite serves a certain non-inclusive ideological or economic agenda instead of higher truths; when it is holding on too long to half-truths and false assumptions; when the political and juridical process is perceived to be unfair, biased or based on double standards; when civility and ethical standards have been eroded; when the democratic

process is focused more on maintaining power and populism than on statesmanship;

It is therefore a mechanism and process - including its underlying assumptions, principles and ideals -, that requires constant evaluation and adjustment, a task which is today unfortunately all too often neglected. Western political leaders often hide behind the 'values of enlightenment', a rather loosely defined set of ideas centred around the sovereignty of reason and scientific discovery as the primary sources to knowledge and truth, and the advancement of ideals such as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, democracy and separation of church and state with as ideal the perfect society with freedom, prosperity and well-being for all. Today however, it can be noticed that reason and scientific discourse has become centred around material reductionism and instrumentalism thus serving materialistic, technological and political progress rather than higher truths, and as such has eroded the essence of what it means to be human and life itself, reducing it to commodity and resource that is detrimental to long-term well-being and sustainability.

It has become increasingly obvious that solving the issues of the 21st century requires to revisit the assumptions and world-view of the enlightenment and the results it has achieved: the good and not so good; where society still has stayed loyal to the ideals of the enlightenment and where it has deviated; whether its assumptions are still valid; etc.. In particular it needs to clarify fundamental questions such as the role of humanity in society and define a unifying world-view that can transcend the key challenges of today, i.e. how to bridge the narrow self-interest (of a person, group, culture, ethnicity, country, religion and philosophy-of-life...) versus the common good of all; short-term benefits versus long-term sustainability; and the (economic) needs of man versus those of the society.

In the current post-conventionalism and post-truth era, - where even science is questioning and revising much of its previous unchallenged assumptions, understanding and achievements -, such a task is long overdue. With the increasing urgency to tackle systemic global issues, the majority of the world is looking for new leadership and direction. And with it also the requirement for the overhaul of our economic, political and social systems; addressing the inherent, hidden and unacknowledged bias still present; and the expansion of our world-view into a society-centred instead of western-centred.

Both sides consider Truth to be universal and one, a Truth to which nobody holds a perfect understanding or monopoly. For the West that can be understood through intellectual enquiry and dialectic dialogue; for Islam one that can be experienced by embodying virtue.

Moreover the West and Islam share a common religious and philosophical history, and in a global world there is no other choice than that of a shared future. The intellectual foundation for an inclusive European Islam and an inclusive European society must therefore be built on a systematic dialectical dialogue and the development of a common values framework: with an eye for cultural and intellectual diversity; a focus on quality over quantity, humanism over materialism; where Muslims are both 100% Muslim and European; and especially where inspiration can be found to make Europe more peaceful, fair, wise, compassionate and meaningful.

If conducted in a cooperative spirit and well communicated, it will immediately eliminate some of the root causes of current and future extremism, radicalism and terrorism. This is because it will shift the general narrative from focus on opposing ideologies and policies based on sentiment towards a positive and inclusive project based on virtue and human values.

The main obstacle for the Islamic world is to let go of some of its historical traumas that caused the end of its golden age, and has redirected its focus more on the past than the future; and for the Western world to keep loyal to its own values of openness to new ideas and universal human rights.

However, such a dialogue can only happen when Muslims re-connect with the intellectual and spiritual richness of Islam; become a role model by the embodiment of Islamic values and virtues; and are able to offer concrete solutions for the challenges of the 21st century based on Islamic universal truths.

3. Islam can only flourish in Europe when it reconnects to its integrative Islam-philosophy

When Islam is reduced to dogmatic black-and-white Islamic-law, ritual and culture, it loses much of its appeal, beauty and power. What remains is at best an identity that creates a we-versus-them and at worst a form of personal and social tyranny

or neuroticism that bars the path to understanding the deeper truth, goodness, tolerance, mercy, inclusivity, beauty and felicity of its message.

9-11 and ISIS came not only as a shock to the West but also to much of the Islamic world. Muslim questioned how their religion, could lead to people committing such monstrous acts on its name. For many Muslims, it triggered a process of soul searching, self-reflection and an effort for a deeper understanding of Islam rather than to just accept tradition and jurist-focussed scholars. With it a clear revival of the philosophical, intellectual, personal growth and spiritual dimension of Islam can be observed at its relevance for many of today's existential challenges.

However, to strengthen and embed this trend requires a new type of Integrative Imam, one that: is at home and rooted in all dimensions (body-mind-soul) of Islam as well as European world- and self-views; has a good grasp on the similarities and differences, challenges and opportunities between the two; is less dogmatic and patriarchal and instead focusses at least equally on spiritual guidance and counselling; makes teachings – in particular the Friday prayers - more relevant for the daily life-experience of the Muslim and its community; etc.

4. Muslims lead by example, with no room for emotional, verbal or physical aggression

Every Muslim is commanded to be a leader, with the capability of righteous leadership limited to the level or stage of one's own self-development: if one is not able to govern others in fairness, one should focus on governing the family in fairness; and if one is not able to govern his or her family, then at least one should govern the body and mind. Oppositely, with the progress along the stages of self-development towards an Oneness-centric world- and self-view, also comes a growing capacity for leadership of others and society. It is interesting to notice that also in the West leadership theory and development in a complex and volatile environment (VUCA) – as the world is in today, increasingly focuses on character and virtue as the beginning and end of leadership.

The personal development journey and the leadership role are in Islam not one of increasing comfort, influencing power or material achievement but one of embodying Truth in the form of wisdom, inner peace, righteousness, compassion, justice etc., both in one self and in the entity for which the Muslim has been given responsibility. The path is through challenges and trials, temptations and

attachments. Time and again, Muslims have to fight their emotions, ego desires, material attachments, old habits and cultural conditioning as well as their limitations and misunderstandings of reality, as part of purifying their bodies, mind and spirits, and the guidance along the different stages of the self and spiritual ranks. The perfect character is reached when only absolute Truth remains as the foundation of all understanding and action.

Obviously, the development of virtue and perfect character cannot happen without the necessary effort and method. Islam provides a complete management system for the purification, discipline, governance, integration and transformation of behaviour (jurisprudence), self- and world view – inclusive of the place of mankind in the cosmos and how to organize ourselves and society (Islam philosophy) and the embodiment of spiritual virtues and qualities in the soul (the Tariqa). These three aspects build on and mutual reinforce each other in the form of Islam, Iman and Ishan.

The perfect character is for Muslims not only the highest possible manifestation of the unlimited potential of mankind, it is also through this perfection that one is able to provide guidance, exert responsibility, lead others, take right decisions, have compassion for all creation, judge in fairness, attract others to the Beauty and Truth of Islam; and understand the foundations to organize society accordingly.

One could say that the meritocracy and hierarchical organization of society in Islam is one based on ranks of virtue; and 'competition' with people – Muslims and non-Muslims -, other religions and life-philosophies equally based on virtue. This is in more than one aspect reminiscent of the Ancient Greek's ideals of virtue. Unfortunately it is an ideal that seems also largely to be forgotten in both the West and East. Still, without reconnecting with those ideals it is clear that both Europe and Islam have strayed away from its essence and value political power and material prosperity above Truth and Virtue. In it can be found the root of all of today's pressing challenging; challenges that cannot be resolved without exemplary leadership based on truth, virtue, compassion and oneness.

It is also this perceived Islamic hypocrisy between dogma and daily example that is so often loathed and ridiculed in the West and obscures Islam as a source of wisdom and righteousness.

An important part and goal of a purified and righteous character is emotional self-restraint. As a well-known Hadith says, "the strongest man is not the one who can overcome his opponent, but the one who can control himself when he is angry". Islam further commands to always incline to peace if there is an opportunity; never to initiate aggression or insult and never exceed the bound retaliation though it is better to trade personal insults with something that is better; not to keep into the company of those who are offensive; etc. all requiring a great deal of self-restraint. As such the struggle with the (lower) self not with anyone else, called the Greater Jihad, is at the forefront of the spiritual path and virtue.

It is those subjects and goals that should be at the heart of Islamic education, whether it be at school, Imam training, spiritual guidance and counselling, or community development. However, the risk is that there is only little transference of those development programs without embedding and anchoring them into the Islamic community in the form of concrete behaviour, initiatives and projects as well as the larger European society of which one is part.

5. There will be no European Islam as long it doesn't have a positive impact on the Islam community and European society as a whole

To paraphrase President Kennedy, in Islam the question is not what the (European) society and community can do for you but what one can do for society. What is the value of striving for the perfect character if it is not put into the service of others and society? And vice-versa, no matter how noble the ideals and aspirations, a difference can only be made if it is done with and for the greater good of others, if possible for the whole of humankind.

On a basic level this means that it is wrong to rely solely or even mainly on the government. "The hand that gives is better than the hand that receives" is a famous Hadith. The way of Islam is one of responsibility, emancipation, empowerment, self-reliance and charity, both on an individual level and as a Muslim community.

As a local Muslim community it means an active brother- and sisterhood and a group to learn and share knowledge; encourage and support each for the embodiment of virtue; provide selfless advice and counselling; organize and support each other in charity; to spread the beauty and righteousness to the greater community and society; etc.

Islamic Communities should analyse needs, put clear goals and measure results with priorities being assigned based on the extent to which each initiative contributes in the short- and long-term to the empowerment of the individual and family; the strengthening of the community; and the added value for society as a whole.

On a national and European level Islam can contribute by providing practical and applicable thinking, ideas, answers, solutions and examples for the many issues and woes of society today– rooted in their Islamic world-view but in a language and framework that resonates with Western intellectual thinking.

In an open civil and inclusive society there is no room for any form of one-sided points-of-view or actions. There is room though for diversity and unorthodoxy in beliefs, thoughts, opinions, and cultural and religion expression, even if they seem to deviate far from conventional thinking. Tensions are seen as opportunities to learn new perspectives and find higher truths. Ideological tensions are channelled through debate; intellectual tensions through scientific inquiry; and personal tensions through active listening and meritocracy. And where there are tensions between the governance and society, there is democracy.

This requires active participation of Muslims in the democratic process in pursuit of a prosperous society based on truth, justice and equality. Which brings us back to the first “pillar”.

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