

Islam in Europe

With their Muslim populations growing, Europeans are reassessing how well they integrate religious minorities.

No one knows for sure how many Muslims live in Europe today, partly because several European nations don't count religion in their national censuses. Most experts estimate there are 15 million to 20 million Muslims living among Western Europe's predominantly Christian population of 400 million. Without taking into account the possible admission of Turkey into the European Union, the number of Muslims is expected to grow to more than 40 million by 2050, representing about 15 percent of Europe's population.

In the face of this growing Muslim population – fuelled mostly by immigration but also by higher birth rates – tensions have risen amid an anti-Muslim attitude that sprang up after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and gained steam after the transit bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.

Various events have sparked worries that at least some Muslims aren't assimilating into European societies or accepting Western values. One example: the widespread protests by Muslims after a Danish newspaper published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2006.

"There's no question that people stick to themselves too much," said Asaf Hussain, an interfaith leader and scholar at the University of Leicester. "A Hindu won't go to a mosque, and a Muslim won't go to a temple."

Hussain said he can't stand the way people often cite their religion first when asked whether they are British or Muslim. "I believe I am a British Pakistani and not a British Muslim," he said. "In America, people say they are American Indian and not American Christian. "Being British should be the key element binding everybody together," he said. As a result of the rapid changes brought on by the influx of Muslims, local and national politicians in Britain and across Europe have struggled to adapt and react.

In France, whose 5 million-strong Muslim minority is Western Europe's largest, a ban on religious symbols and apparel in public schools took effect in 2004. The ban included all overtly religious dress and signs, including Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses. It was a controversial move but one that seems to have been quietly accepted by members of all faith groups.

On another note, many French were angered in June when a court in Lille annulled the marriage of two Muslims after the husband claimed his wife was not a virgin. Critics said the move set women's rights back by many generations.

Also in June, France's highest court upheld a decision to deny French citizenship to a Muslim woman who covers herself in a head-to-toe veil because she hasn't assimilated enough into French society. Critics said the decision took France's secularism too far. Even so, many Muslims say they feel welcome in France, where the population seems to have grown so accustomed to having large mosques in their midst that many mayors even provide land at cheap rates for them.

"There is a big fuss about Islamization, but French society is very accepting," said Deborah Remmane, secretary of the Muslim Students of France association in Paris. "People raise a Muslim red flag when they want to distract from other issues." Remmane said that if segments of the population don't get along, it generally has more to do with financial status than it does with religion. "If you are Muslim and the daughter of a doctor, you won't have any problem fitting in," she said.

In Switzerland, there's been a far greater concern about the spread of radical Islam and of mosques, with a nationwide referendum scheduled this month to ban the tall spires known as minarets on mosques. Supporters say the ban is needed because the minarets could lead to a disruption of social cohesion, while critics say the ban would violate human rights and fuel extremism.

The rise of mosques has become a catalyst for tension in other parts of Europe as well. In Cologne, Germany, rallies have been organized to protest what critics call the "Islamification" of the ethnically diverse city amid plans to build a large, domed mosque complete with two 177-foot-tall minarets.

In London, too, plans to build a "mega mosque" for 12,000 worshipers next to the site of the 2012 Olympics has drawn more than 250,000 signatures from those opposed to its construction. There are about 1,600 mosques in Britain, a country that has tried to encourage a shared sense of national identity. In general, the British government has sought to engage more with Muslim communities since the 2005 suicide bomb attacks in London, in which four British nationals blew themselves up on the city's transport network, killing 52 others.

Critics say some have gone too far to appease Britain's Muslim minority. Earlier this year, the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said an element of shariah, or Islamic religious law, would inevitably have to be incorporated into British law, prompting waves of protest.

Denis MacEoin, an Islamic studies expert at Newcastle University, said polls show that a majority of Muslims express loyalty to Britain. But MacEoin said there is less devotion to British values than many people would like. "There is still a lot of Islamic literature around which calls on Muslims to have nothing to do with non-Muslims and non-Muslim society," he said.

MacEoin said that by seeking more ways to be self-sufficient, Muslims are creating a society within the broader society. "The use of the veil by women, for example, is designed to keep people at a distance," he said. "Muslim schools make sure

Muslims growing up never quite fit in to the society around them.”

But Peter Willetts, a professor of global politics at City University in London, said people often make sweeping generalizations about Muslims that simply aren't true. He said there is so much diversity among Islamic communities in Europe that one can't paint all Muslims with the same brush. “In Europe, we have simultaneously Muslims who are well-integrated, Muslims who are struggling to achieve integration, Muslims who are separate but content and secure, and Muslims who are separate and alienated,” he underlined.

In Leicester, Hussain says that both the government and religious groups must do more to foster meaningful integration. Rather than simply coexisting, he says people from different faiths must forge real relationships with one another. Toward that end, Hussain has started taking white English people on “intercultural safaris,” visiting temples, mosques, Sikh gurdwaras and ethnic restaurants in Leicester so that people can build an understanding of other cultures.

“Even at the university we have Muslims sitting together in one area at lunch and Hindus sitting together in another,” he said. “There's a lack of integration. This is the real problem.”

(The Austin American-Statesman, October 12, 2008:
[www.statesman.com/insight/content/editorial/stories/
insight/10/12/1012europemuslims.html](http://www.statesman.com/insight/content/editorial/stories/insight/10/12/1012europemuslims.html))