

Identity and Diversity: Muslims in the US and Europe

by Youssef Azghari and Manfred Wolf

Published in December 2007 in the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* and the US based *West Portal Monthly*

The European attitude towards immigration is often contrasted with the American. In the US, assimilation is said to be easier, immigrants made to feel more quickly at home (leaving aside of course the illegal immigrants streaming in from Mexico). The second and third generation of immigrants are Americans, sometimes "hyphenated" (e.g., Italian-Americans) but still Americans. They're no longer "immigrants," as they are in Europe.

This observation about the US has become a common side bar of the 'Muslims in Europe' debate.

Further, the makeup of America's Muslims is frequently compared favorably to its European counterpart. In the United States, the income of Muslim Americans parallels that of the average American and ranks higher than the income of African Americans or Hispanics. Sometimes prosperous middle-class neighborhoods are pointed to -- for instance, the town of Fremont in the San Francisco Bay Area is a rather comfortable suburban settlement of tens of thousands of Afghan Americans who live contentedly in their small-town setting. And while not prosperous, the city of Dearborn, Michigan, numbers tens of thousands of middle class Arab-Americans.

True, once in a while radical activity manifests itself in such far-flung places as Florida or upstate New York, but these can be considered exceptions that prove the rule.

Several reasons for the difference between Europe and the US come to mind. Immigrants came to the US of their own volition. Once the masses swept over Ellis Island in the nineteenth century they had to fend for themselves. The government did not protect them or otherwise care for them. It wished them well, but that was about it. After all, they were not asked to come.

This rather hard attitude toward the newcomer has not gone away -- while difficult for some, especially from a group-oriented culture, it actually favored the individualist, the adventurer, the entrepreneur.

Many Muslim immigrants in America have a middle class background and arrived here neither penniless nor illiterate. The differences with Europe are striking, since most Muslims came to Europe either as guest workers or political refugees. The former, of course, were solicited, asked to come to work in European factories. They were ideal for the assembly

line and not selected from their brain power. Thus many Moroccans who came to northern Europe were actually Berbers from the Rif Mountains, impoverished and illiterate. The consequence to this day is that European Muslims are socially less prominent and frequently ghettoized.

Another difference between America and Europe in the reception of Muslims brings us closer to the subject of identity. American culture is less circumscribed in what it regards as American behavior. There are many ways to be an American. If Ahmed and Yasmina have jobs, live in a nice house, raise a few reasonably well-behaved children who go to school and don't get into major trouble, then it doesn't diminish their Americanness in the least if they celebrate Ramadan, or go to the mosque -- or wear whatever, including a head scarf.

This looseness of what it means to be American goes along with a belief that American culture is powerful enough to overcome other influences and maybe other identities. We know that American fashions, pop culture, the English language will rise to the globalized top. Considering the pervasiveness of American culture worldwide, that's realistic enough.

There is of course at times a culture clash, a dis-affinity between the old and the new -- legendary historic quarrels between parents and children -- but this appears to smooth itself out in time. The new identity, precisely because of a certain easy lack of insistence by the prevailing culture, emerges without major birth pangs.

In the large American family with so many odd members, one more odd member won't stick out. In Europe, the family is smaller and more homogeneous, hence more exclusive. And to stay with the family metaphor: the US can be said to behave like a strict father, urging his children to fend for themselves, be independent, solve their own problems, see to the future. Europe plays the role of the mother, who tries to protect the children, do as much for them as possible, watch over their needs and ward off some of life's problems.

She also has a somewhat narrower view of the values she would like her children to uphold: some behavior is out of bounds. Europe is more restrictive about its identity. America's relative looseness about how to behave -- what constitutes an American --allows for easier entry into the society. Norms and values are not as constrained or narrowly defined as they are in Europe.

Perhaps one way of reconciling these two parental attitudes is that the father needs to exercise a little more care and patience, while the mother should show a little more understanding of the children's independence and display greater flexibility about their norms and values. America could be a little less distant and more caring, Europe less protective and more easygoing.

Youssef Azghari is lecturer at Avans University in the Netherlands, columnist for the Dutch newspaper 'Trouw' and is author of 'Culturally Determined communication'.

West Portal Monthly columnist Manfred Wolf is professor emeritus at San Francisco State University and contributes frequently to newspapers and magazines in the US and Europe.