

The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe

Jytte Klausen

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The Islamic Challenge ought to be required reading for every parliamentarian, not only in Western Europe but also in Australia — indeed, anywhere there is a substantial and established Muslim community. Professor Klausen focuses on what may seem to some a contradiction in terms: secular Islamic leadership. Her subjects are not Imams, but doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, businessmen and teachers — mostly young, mostly not European born but ‘recent immigrants or refugees whose political engagement predates their arrival in Europe’ (p 47) who are actively and vigorously engaged in European civil life.

Professor Klausen, herself an immigrant, has engaged in a subtle and profoundly interesting exploration of the limits of European secularism, of the ways in which Muslim leaders see the status of their communities within European countries and the options open to the members of those communities: assimilation/integration, Canadian-style pluralism or multiculturalism, or possibly a US-style ‘ethnic melting pot’. From the pessimism of Krishan Kumar, who describes Muslims as ‘the new “other” of Europe’ and suggests that ‘today the “Jewish Question” in Europe has been largely “solved”, mainly by getting rid of the Jews’ (p 70) to those, such as Farah Karimi, who worry ‘about the conservatism of the Muslim community in the Netherlands and [point] out that the immigrant organizations are led by old men’ (p 15), voices such as hers also argue that ‘the representatives of the national Muslim associations are “fundamentalists”, and should be more forthright about distancing themselves from conservatives and giving support to liberal versions of Islam’ (p 47).

To a lawyer, the first and clearest message is a reminder of the extent to which religion and religious values are inextricably intertwined in law. In Denmark, for example, the established Lutheran Church, known as the Folkekirken or People’s Church, has exclusive responsibility for registering births and deaths and effectively complete control over cemeteries, leading to a history of conflict between the established church and Muslims who seek to follow Islamic burial rituals. Similar difficulties arise in other European countries, including Great Britain, where the automatic representation of the Church of England in the House of Lords leads some to argue that there ought to be equitable representation for other faith communities. The author argues that, while such conflicts underlie the media allegations (current in Europe as in Australia) of a ‘culture war’ between Islam and Europe, the insistence of media commentators that the ‘root problem’ is that Muslims have difficulty in adopting ‘secular norms’ ignores the fact that many of the most problematical ‘norms’ are not secular, but Christian, and became part of the ‘secular’ law as part of the ‘European settlement’ following the wars of religion between rival Christian sects.

While this is a fascinating work, for this reviewer it raises more questions than it answers, and the questions it raises are, it seems to me, central to any resolution of what the author terms 'the Islamic challenge'. I find it remarkable and disturbing that the eloquent and educated Muslim elite interviewed by the author — an elite apparently both largely (though not exclusively) secular in orientation and, on the author's argument, committed to liberal values — is not on the whole European born. I cannot help wondering why, even in Britain where the Muslim community dates back to the 1950s, the children of the first and second wave of immigrants are not better represented among this elite and about the kind of educational, social and political failures that suggests. The only exception is France, where fully 60 per cent of the leaders participating in the author's study were French born (p 23). Elsewhere in Europe, the proportion ranges from a high of about 25 per cent to a low of 4.5 per cent (in Sweden, where migration did not begin until the 1990s). While the author suggests that the various cohorts of migrants carry with them the scars of the context of their migration, and proffers this as one reason why a leadership class has yet to emerge among their descendants, it remains puzzling (and depressing) that the emerging Muslim leadership comes from a cadre which one would have thought would be less 'acculturated' and with less genuine attachment to their current social and cultural milieu. These and associated issues were not pursued, but merely touched on in passing, perhaps because their pursuit would have taken the author outside the disciplinary framework in which she is most at home.

A related concern lies closer to the heart of her enterprise, rather than at its periphery. It seems to me that her conceptualisation of liberalism is somewhat shallow, particularly given her political science background. In her concluding chapter she associates 'liberal values' with 'engaging with the institutions of democracy' and with an appeal to human rights or, more abstractly to the principles of 'humanist universalism' (p 204). A little later, she contrasts the contractarian liberalism of John Rawls with the more communitarian approach of Michael Walzer, but her discussion seems to this reviewer somewhat unfocused and lacking in depth. It is almost as if she has not attempted to identify core liberal values that transcend more limited national norms and frameworks, but has simply assumed that such values exist and that they have something (unspecified) to do with democratic institutions and with human rights. This weakness limits the effectiveness of her concluding chapter and, to some extent, undermines some of the arguments and assumptions underlying the research reported earlier.

These concerns do nothing to undercut the value of Klausen's work. In times when politicians of all persuasions find it lamentably easy to treat complex and multi-faceted communities as monolithic and to join with media 'shock jocks' in caricaturing complex and highly differentiated communities as monolithic 'tribes' or as religious zealots, her engagement with an emerging Muslim political leadership that is overwhelmingly secular in character is refreshing. Reading her work, I found myself wondering whether such a leadership cadre exists in Australia today and, if it does, what its broad demographic characteristics might be. Her work also (and commendably

clearly) makes the point that the various Muslim communities in Europe cannot simply be defined by religious practices or country of origin. It suggests that, in some difficult to specify sense, a 'cultural' Euro-Islamic community is emerging — one that is defined not simply by religious observance or by geographic or sectarian origin, but by a cultural identification with Islamic traditions and customs, in much the same way as even non-religious Jews retain a 'cultural connection' with their ancestral faith community.

The author's methodology appendix warrants special commendation. It is clearly set out and provides a concise account of the choices involved in constructing the study and the reasons for those choices. Her comments on terminological and definitional issues are apposite and identify problems that are as likely to be encountered by legal scholars engaged in socio-legal research as by political scientists. This reviewer found the information contained in the appendix to be particularly interesting, and as valuable as anything in the body of her work.

Despite its limitations, *The Islamic Challenge* is a fascinating work, useful both for its ability to trace the legal scars left by the wars of religion and the incomplete separation of church and state characterising the European settlement, and its delineation of the particular barriers encountered by practising Muslims as a consequence of those legal scars. As Klausen notes: 'European democracy evolved in concert with strong pressures of homogenization, in which the rights of minority religions and languages were sacrificed in the pursuit of social integration.' (p 142) While the European scene is very different from that in Australia, we have much to learn from Klausen's study, something highlighted by her chapter on 'Sexual Politics and Multiculturalism'. While the chapter ostensibly focuses upon the well-known battle over 'religious symbols' — and particularly the 'right' of Muslim schoolgirls to attend school wearing the headscarf — Klausen describes the battle in much broader terms. She meticulously describe the initial 'pro-feminist' justification for the ban, while noting sardonically that Chirac jumped on the bandwagon despite having previously had little if any interest in women's rights. When the ban was introduced into the National Assembly, the emphasis was one deeply familiar to us in Australia: 'protecting the French way of life'. She cites Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who stated: 'Integration is a process that presupposes a mutual wish [to integrate], a shift towards certain values, a choice of a way of life, a commitment to a certain view of the world proper for France.' (p 176)

These words resonate strongly with the stance of the current government in Australia, and with repeated rhetorical flourishes emphasising the 'obligation' of migrants to adopt 'Australian values' and the Australian way of life. Indeed, two Liberal backbenchers, Sophie Panopoulos and Bronwyn Bishop, have called for a ban on female students wearing the headscarf in state schools, although there is little political support for their call. Interestingly, the Muslim leaders interviewed by the author offer little support for an expansive reading of multicultural solutions such as that proposed by theoreticians such as Kymlicka, one giving formal legal recognition to Islamic religious law (*shariah*). Across Europe, with the notably partial exception of Britain, the

demand is for equal rights, not different rights — multiculturalism being seen as an experiment that has been tried and failed. While Australian multiculturalism is very different from the project advocated by Kymlicka, which has yet to provide institutional solutions that balance the need for solidarity against the need for self-government and cultural and political autonomy, these debates resonate with many current developments in Australia. Here — unlike in Europe, where most countries (Spain and Sweden are notable exceptions) lack indigenous minorities that remain outside the mainstream — these debates are ongoing with respect to Indigenous people, but negligible with respect to other culturally distinct minorities.

Klausen's voice is valuable and distinctive. Against the background of contemporary debates, and ongoing attempts to demonise the Muslim community and characterise it as monolithic, she offers a balanced and nuanced picture of the aspirations of a largely young, well-educated and aspirational elite. That it is overwhelmingly not European born provides a cautionary note, particularly in countries where Muslim immigrant communities are well established and have a lengthy history, such as Britain. Many questions remain unanswered. More information on the demographic background, particularly the countries of origin, of this emerging elite would have been useful. It was not clear whether the emerging European Muslim identity the author flagged superseded national origin and cultural and ethnic differences. Also unclear was whether there were salient differences between the cultural origins of the largely immigrant elite and the second-generation communities in those countries where there is a lengthy history of migration. Despite its limitations, this is an extremely valuable work, engagingly written, thoroughly researched and an extremely valuable contribution to the literature. Its inclusiveness, particularly with respect to the voices of women, is to be commended, as is its willingness to acknowledge the diverse perspectives within a community often unfairly characterised as somehow monolithic. A central, and particularly salient, message may be found in her acknowledgment that: 'The shift to increasingly assimilationist rhetoric and policies has alienated mainstream Muslim political leaders, not because Muslim leaders oppose integration or think that Muslims do not need to work harder at integrating, but because they are discomfited by the implication that Muslims cannot be "Western" and retain their commitments to Islam as a source of faith and culture. "We always have to explain who we are not," complained a Dutch social democrat. "We never get to explain who we are."' (p 63) Here is the real message for Australian social policy. Listen to these voices; do not assume you already know the answers.

— SANDRA BERNIS