Belgium

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In the core countries of the European Union, Muslims, today, are counted in the millions and Islam is engaged in a process of institutionalization in the midst of secular, anti-Muslim sentiment, and religious prejudice is increasing among the majority population. Since the beginning of the 17th century, Muslims, especially youngsters, get the impression that they are not safe in our societies: i.e. the Turks, the Moroccans and the others, naturalized or not, immigrants and converts, are they to be imagined as enemies from within? Will they, as a consequence, eventually have to be driven out again – just like the Moriscos in Spain were, at the beginning of the 17th century? There is no denying that there are signs that superficially seem to confirm such a reading, for instance, the riots and confrontations between ‘Muslim’ youngsters and the police which on a more or less regular basis break out in our towns.

Already, a new racism is legitimizing this growing polarization between the so-called indigenous population and the so-called immigrants, not only in Belgium but in other European countries as well. This new racism, which is actually accompanying the construction of European unity, can be identified as an ‘anti-Muslim racism’, while it is being constructed along the selfsame lines as the anti-Semitism in the thirties, this European racism is mainly based on the ethnicization of cultural, i.e. religious, differences between ‘Europeans’ and ‘Muslims’. Starting from the myth of an originally ‘white’ and ‘Christian’ Europe, it operates by identifying ‘Turk/Moroccan’ and ‘Muslim’ and, generally, by identifying ‘Immigrant’ and ‘Muslim’. As Fred Halliday formulated it, this anti-Muslimism is nothing but too much hostility to Islam as a religion [. . .] but hostility to Muslims, to communities of peoples whose sole or main religion is Islam and whose Islamic character, real or invented, forms one of the objects of prejudice.1 Feeding on this anti-Muslim feelings and fuelling them at the same time, right-wing extremist parties are exploiting the situation, in Belgium as well as in other countries of the E.U., in order to win popular votes.2

However, there is no fatigue in this evolution. All in all, the process of Muslim integration into our secularized society has been going on peacefully for many decades. It is urgent though that an end be put to all discrimination and also that Muslims, especially youngsters, get the chance to contribute as Muslim citizens to the social development of their country. The number of Muslims in Belgium – i.e. of people who have Muslim immigrant background and/or are considering themselves Muslims (converts included) – is rapidly growing. Of course, figures are necessarily inaccurate, for (a) the criterion of nationality is becoming less and less relevant since a growing number of people originating from Muslim countries acquire Belgian nationality; (b) the definition of Muslim identity has inevitably many nuances, going from strictly practising believers to laymen andagnostics. In the early nineties, the total number of people in Belgium with a Muslim cultural background was estimated at 281,000 – more than 2.5 per cent of the total population. At this moment, the number is going beyond 350,000. Concurrent with this demographic growth, there has been a proliferation of mosques and prayer halls: on the eve of the new century, Belgium counts some 240 places of Islamic worship.

Whatever the precise figures may be, it is obvious that the question of cultural and social fact. Quantitatively, it repre- portable minority constituted of the religious group (e.g. the salaries and pensions of the Imams). The importance of this kind of sacred presence. The final goal should be the ‘interculturaliza- tion’ of our society.

The settlement of a large Muslim population in Belgium is an irreversible phenomenon. The major question therefore that has to be faced by our society, and most spectacular thing that, for the great majority of them at least, would be tantamount to demanding that they abandon their religion? There is no denying that, from the perspective of basic human rights, the Belgian state made a good start when as early as 1974 it passed a law granting Islamic worship the same status as that accorded to religions historically established in the country: Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism. The immediate and most spectacular effect of this recognition was the introduction (since 1975-76) of the teaching of Islam in public schools, on the same basis as the other religious sciences. At present there is no indication that Muslims, teachers giving Islamic instruction in both primary and secondary schools, their salaries being paid by the State. The law of 1974 also allowed for financial provisions to be made for the costs of the infrastructures (e.g. places of worship) and the personnel (e.g. the salaries and pensions of the Imams). The importance of this kind of religious ‘engagement’ by the Belgian state – which is officially a secular state, based on the principle of separation between Church and State – is measured when one considers that in this way the Catholic Church is annually receiving a total provision of no less than about 10 billion Belgian Francs. This sum is paid by the Belgian taxpayer – which is also by non-Catholics, for the history of religious freedom in Belgium is no longer ‘safely’ located between the indigenous population and the so-called immigrants, are they to be imagined the same as enemies from within? Will they, as a consequence, eventually have to be driven out again – just like the Moriscos in Spain were, at the beginning of the 17th century? There is no denying that there are signs that superficially seem to confirm such a reading, for instance, the riots and confrontations between ‘Muslim’ youngsters and the police which on a more or less regular basis break out in our towns.

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