LIVING TOGETHER WITH MUSLIMS IN EUROPE AND OVERCOMING FEAR

A 'Spiritual Exercise'

Jean-Marc Balhan

Setting Off from Where You Are

> The name of spiritual exercises [is] given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul. (Exx 1)

The Situation in Brief

In many European countries, the recent arrival of Muslims has caused and continues to cause considerable problems as far as the question of 'living together' is concerned. The newcomers have not shared directly in the long history of those countries—or, indeed, have shared, but in a very different way (through colonisation) from that of most people living there. Then again, the Muslims are seen as bearers of values that are not always considered to be in accord, for various reasons, with those of the society that first welcomed them. Obviously, we are talking here of the countries of Western Europe. In the case of the Balkans, the Muslim presence goes back many centuries and has been a constitutive element in the birth and evolution of those countries.

When Muslims began to arrive in the second half of the twentieth century, as part of an immigration policy calling for workers, they often came from former colonies, such as the Maghreb and the India-Pakistan subcontinent, and their presence was hardly noticed at first. This changed towards the end of the 1970s when internal and external forces came into play: on the one hand, the migrants began, for various reasons, to settle down and to organize themselves on the religious level also; on the other

hand, Islam emerged as dominant in what were called 'Muslim countries'. Here, the Iranian revolution of 1979 was a turning point.

The year 1989 saw the start of the first controversies in Europe, whether with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie or the affair of the *foulard* (headscarf) in France. It was then that Europeans first realised that Islam was no longer part of a far-off universe but was a reality present among them, which could also be seen as a 'menace'. In the words of Nilüfer Göle, this emergence of Islam,

> … has often been felt as a backward step, as a menace to women's rights and to free speech, a calling in question of what had been won after long struggle against the hold of the Church, thanks to the secularisation of political power.[1]

These two controversies created a situation of conflict which has continued, fuelled by other controversies relating, in different countries, to the construction of mosques and minarets, prayers held in public space, caricatures of Muhammad, female attire, halal food and sharia law.

Leeds Makkah Masjid

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[1] Nilüfer Göle, *Musulmans au quotidien. Une enquête européenne sur les controverses autour de l'islam*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 35. English translation forthcoming as *The Daily Lives of Muslims: Controversy and Islam in Contemporary Europe* (London: Zed, 2017).

The attack on New York of 11 September 2001 marked another turning point: the use of violence by radical Islamist groups or individuals. More attacks by Al-Qaeda followed in Europe, including the one in London in 2005 and, more recently, those claimed by Daesh. Europeans have discovered with horror that perpetrators may well be young people who were born and grew up among 'themselves', in Europe.

Reactions

The fear provoked by the 'otherness' of Muslims, coupled with that caused by radical Islamist attacks, has transformed the presence of Muslims in Europe into a problem for many Europeans. The diagnosis and solution of this problem vary with different persons and different countries.

This fear has moved many politicians to redefine distinctive traits of their culture. Thus, in France, *laïcité* (the 'lay' or 'secular' character of the state) has been reinterpreted to mean the 'neutralisation' of public space and has become a benchmark of French cultural identity. In Germany, the notion of *Leitkultur* has been created to signify the obligation of loyalty to the dominant culture. At the same time in the Netherlands the tradition of multiculturalism has been called into question by the claim that it simply reinforced *conservative* cultural notions in the name of respect for different traditions. In Great Britain, too, there is a feeling that segregation and division between communities had led to radicalisation.

The same fear has also made possible among 'intellectuals' points of view styled *décomplexés* ('free from complexes'). Among these one can find the most extreme simplifications, alongside insults, as if supposed 'danger' could justify all sorts of abuse and doing away with the taboos on racism and xenophobia. Then people begin to talk of 'islamophobia', an ambiguous and much disputed umbrella-term which has at least had the merit of giving a name to a social reality and thus recognising its existence. More specifically, this term has the advantage that it brings out the religious aspect—that of Islam—which is to be found in the new social and political divisions.

On the political level, debates with regard to national identity have provided a fertile ground for the birth of a new populism:

> What is in play is not so much a new attack by the extreme right, but a populist force that surfs on the wave created by the 'fall of taboos' …. The political manipulation of fear in the face of Islam brings about a convergence of tendencies, ideologies and personalities,

which would normally be at opposite poles of the political spectrum, jumbling the traditional political split between right and left.[2]

For their part, movements on the extreme right change their appearance, are no longer marginal, introduce a new political agenda with Islam as their target, and acquire a new legitimacy. These new political groups claim to be defending the national community against an 'Islamic invasion'. They come together on the European stage to combat public signs of Islamic presence, while, according to them, all Muslims are grouped as belonging to a monolithic, uniform body, with no individual faces or voices.

Such fears, which are ours nowadays, need to be recognised and acknowledged, avoiding both self-blame and the heaping of blame on others. It then becomes possible to disarm and redirect such fears. Thus we will be able to find a just response to the challenge facing us: how we in Europe are to live together with Muslims, now that they—for all their differences—have become integral to many European societies.

To Get Rid of All Disordered Affections

> In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

> None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself. (Tradition of the Prophet, Al-Bukhari, book 1, Hadith 12)

The Mechanisms of Fear

In itself, fear is something good. 'Without fear, we'd all be dead.'[3] For we would be incapable of gauging the importance of real dangers and protecting ourselves. And yet fear is not an infallible guide. When we react to what we see as a danger, that does not mean that the danger is a real one. Fear can be the cause of stupid behaviour which causes harm to ourselves, to others and, in general, to the communities of which we form part. And, as we have seen, fear can be exploited by unscrupulous politicians. Even when the fear arises because matters of importance are being called into question, the supposed link between values that need to be preserved and the menace posed by a particular religious minority is often artificial and born of figments.

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[2] Göle, *Musulmans au quotidien*, 57.
[3] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, Ma: Belknap, 2012), 20.

For fear to serve as a guide, it has to be backed up by sympathy, in other words, by a preoccupation with the common good. Fear is actually a product of egoism, a form of extreme attention, but focused on the self. Fear resists the wider view of what is good. Later we shall come across several lines of reasoning that help to disarm fear. However, in the first place, we should consider briefly some of the mechanisms adopted by fear, before we go on to examine the two main sources for 'fear of Islam' in Europe.

The US philosopher Martha Nussbaum has listed the main mechanisms that can induce and increase fear in relation to a particular phenomenon.[4]

1. A *rhetoric is used* which gives fundamental importance for our survival or well-being to that phenomenon, presents it as very close at hand, and stresses our sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Thus, the populists will insist on the power and evil intent of Muslims, while emphasizing their own clear vision and reliability.

2. *Interpretation based on available information*: we have a tendency to give excessive importance to events that have involved us closely or have received a lot of media coverage. One need only compare the resonance of the attacks by Daesh perpetrated within the European community with that of attacks in a Middle Eastern country.

3. *The cascade phenomenon*, which means that we tend to imitate others; we do this either because of their reputation, or because we have the impression that their behaviour tells us something new, in this case more about the supposed 'Muslim menace'.

4. *Peer pressure*, in this case following others because one is ashamed or too embarrassed to think differently.

5. *Distress in relation to the body and its weaknesses*: certain categories of persons get associated by projection with our animal nature and our disgust at our own waste. This dislike is linked to fear of contamination.

At this point, readers can best examine their own consciences and see when and why some particular such mechanism may have had an effect

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[4] Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, chapter 2.

in their lives. However, the next step is for us to examine the two principal phenomena that set these mechanisms in motion.

The Sources of Fear

In Europe two phenomena, in particular, have promoted feelings of discomfort and fear associated with the presence of Islam and Muslims: the violence used by so-called 'radical Islamists', which has produced a feeling of *physical insecurity*—the fear that we or our loved ones may be wounded or killed in a terror attack; and the presence in the public space of signs and symbols that are 'different' and which inspire a feeling of *symbolic insecurity*—the fear that we are no longer *at home*.

Radicalisation and the Feeling of Physical Insecurity

Farhad Kosrokhavar has defined radicalisation as,

> … the process by which an individual or a group adopts a violent form of action that is directly linked to an extreme ideology with political, social or religious attachments, which calls in question the established order, be it on the political, social or cultural level.[5]

In the West and elsewhere, this phenomenon is restricted to a minority. In fact, many might support a radical ideology, or adopt violent action for economic or social reasons. But there are not many who do both together, as a means of self-expression.

Radicalisation may be associated with different ideologies, but in Europe jihadi radicals are considered differently from political or separatist extremists. Political extremism is considered to be an internal issue within a society, while radical Islamism is felt to be external, as for most people Islam is still a non-European religion. Seen from this angle, radical Islamists born in a European country are perceived as more troubling, for they are seen to incarnate treason to that country or to European identity.

How is one to explain the emergence of radical views? In the first place, there is a clear link between jihadi movements and social exclusion. In the case of Europe, the social exclusion is that of the descendants of immigrants who have been marginalised. In the Near East, the exclusion is that suffered by a modernised social class; many educated young people are unemployed and find themselves excluded from society by

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[5] Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2014), 7–8. This book is about to be translated as *Radicalization: Why Some People Choose the Path of Violence* (New York: New Press, 2017). The following paragraphs are indebted to Khosrokhavar's work.

despotic and corrupt powers. But another factor is the disappearance of a bipolar world where ideology was of major importance. Islam takes in part the role that once was played by the utopias of collective salvation.

Once persons have been radicalised, their conduct shows three tendencies:

1. As humiliated persons, they blame the system because it has reduced them to insignificance, pushing them to the margin of both the political and the economic spheres.

2. As persons who have been victimised, those humiliated and excluded have the impression that they are without any future and build up an internal feeling of ghettoisation. The pressure of this situation leads some into crime or individualised violence. Others opt for a sort of interior exile, withdrawing from society and clinging to those tokens of Islam that provide a sense of identity—this gives them an interior peace but at the cost of being enclosed within a universe which is more or less sectarian; they become Salafist. But those who revolt and want to take action can do so by spreading their hate against non-Muslims through the adoption of a jihadi outlook. Islam can then offer them an active alternative that ideologies of the extreme left are no longer capable of supplying.

3. As individual members of a community under attack (an imagined Muslim community), these people have a sense of belonging that allows them to overcome the stigma of exclusion and gain a feeling

of identity: they become 'born again'. Whereas before they had belonged to an inferior social class, they become heroes of Islam—which is now the religion of the oppressed. In relation to the world against which they are struggling, such people are negative heroes: the more they are feared and detested by that world—which for them is painted entirely black—the more glory they win.

As became clear in point 2, not every feeling of intolerable injustice leads necessarily to radical views, but all radicalisation presupposes a feeling of injustice. Fortunately, there are also many who choose social and economic integration. They overcome what they have suffered and adopt a more realistic view of society. They show this by conduct which combines flexibility and adaptation. For them, hate is no longer the fundamental category. There is a need for proactive measures reducing the marginalisation and social exclusion of the classes that have emerged from immigration. Everything possible must be done to help people make the positive choice mentioned above, along with the various programmes of 'deradicalisation' that are already in place in different countries.

The Appearance of 'Foreign' Signs and Feeling of Symbolic Insecurity

Even if radical Islamists are much talked about and can foment a feeling of insecurity, they are nevertheless a tiny minority. In Europe, the fear of Islam has been spread mainly by the progressive appearance in public space of signs that can be interpreted in quite contradictory ways, such as minarets or, in France in the summer of 2016, the burkini. Reactions can be very different and inspire a hardened sense of identity.

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Much in the way of signs and symbols is conveyed in public space: in how we present our bodies to public view, and how our buildings reflect by their form a common history. This symbolic space is structured rather like a language. When we can understand the language, we feel at home. On the other hand, we are not at our ease when we find ourselves in spaces that lack signs, as happens with some new urbanisations conceived by modernist architects. The same happens in those spaces where the signs that appear are unintelligible, as is the case in some far-off cities, especially if the alphabets used are not Roman.

For their own part, immigrants and their descendants affirm their cultural and religious identity as an irreplaceable source of dignity. So they need to decorate the public space that they share with their own symbols, especially as regards clothing. Then they too will feel 'at home'. However,

> … in the case of these signs, the society that has welcomed them lacks the keys to understand them. It fails to understand and often makes the worst possible interpretation as a means to rationalise their discomfort …. That society then feels that it is being inexorably expelled from its own room, and a wind of panic begins to blow: we have to impede and then expel, whatever the cost, these semiotic Saracens before it is too late.[6]

And this repression of symbols usually goes hand-in-hand with social repression. One does not happen without the other.

Several means seem to present themselves by which this confrontation may be avoided:

1. Relying on the majority principle, the host societies could forbid, in an authoritarian fashion, those practices that they consider inappropriate in any public space that is shared in common, even if this means ignoring some fundamental rights. However, assimilation cannot be imposed by force, no matter how desirable this may appear, as social cohesion will suffer.

2. Conversely, exhorting the 'locals' to be more tolerant and friendly would be equally disrespectful; not to take seriously the unease felt by the majority would indicate another sort of contempt.

3. Hardly more wise would be to urge minorities to vindicate their rights without at least suggesting to them that they bear in mind

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[6] Henri Goldman, *Le rejet français de l'islam. Une souffrance républicaine* (Paris: PUF, 2012), 69. The reflections used above are taken from chapter 6, 'Partager l'espace publique' ('sharing public space').

the malaise that some of their practices, no matter how innocent, are causing.

In the face of these reciprocal fears and the need to reaffirm mutual identity against this background of worry, the only possible choice is to enter into *negotiation* regarding the permanent sharing of symbolic space. The group of citizens that has emerged as a result of immigration must be permitted to make the public space their own; that is, they should be able to display those symbols that make sense to them, while hoping that, in time, others can get familiarised with these symbols. Ideally they would do this with moderation, adapting themselves to the capacity of assimilation of the majority, so as to avoid reactions of rejection. However, for people who often suffer discrimination and humiliation, this will not always be easy. In reply to the exclusion they have felt, they may well occasionally claim their place in society by laying stress on their difference.

Here we are invited to share symbolic space,

> … just as a meal which is shared, where each person has brought a dish and will be curious to taste those of the others. Thus, each group will be able to take in and eventually make their own certain symbols that are prudently displayed by the other groups and added to the table. Each will make a point of not wounding the taste buds of those not accustomed to certain spices. There will then be a common 'we' brought about by the weaving together of many particular 'we's'.[7]

The image of weaving is further developed by Nilüfer Göle. She writes that both jihadists and islamophobes,

> … are opposed to this productive process of cultural mingling and defend an impossible purity—religious or national. That is why they want to sabotage life in common; they prevent debate and destroy any place of encounter by the use of violence, verbal insult for some, physical elimination for others. The antidote to the tactics adopted by the extremists is to be found in the possibility of … shifting from collage to weaving of differences. That is what has made Europe so exceptional, her creative liberty, her tendency to reinvent herself with others. Rather like a magic carpet, Europe opens up a horizon of possibilities with her Muslims.[8]

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[7] Goldman, *Le rejet français de l'islam*, 81.
[8] Göle, *Musulmans au quotidien*, 289.

But she still has to set off ….

Here a number of paths can be signposted to help us make the meal, and the carpet ….

'To Seek and Find the Divine Will …'

> The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet. (Matthew 22:8–9)

> Oh mankind, We have created you from male and female, and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. (Qur'an 49.13)

To Disarm Fear

Martha Nussbaum suggests three elements that can help us overcome our fears and motivate us to begin a process of social negotiation and which provide the means to do so.[9] Here, I shall develop especially the third and most important of these, that is, entering into true communication with the other.

1. *To adopt political principles that bear witness to an equal respect for all citizens.* The point here is the acknowledgement that all human beings are equal in dignity and that therefore the state cannot infringe that dignity which is shared equally by all. Also necessary is the acknowledgement that freedom of conscience is intrinsic to human dignity and that such freedom of conscience is vulnerable. This means that it is impeded when persons are prevented from practising the rites that their beliefs impose on them, and it is flouted when persons are forced to subscribe to convictions that are not theirs. The concrete application of these abstract principles in a given society will depend on its past history; but there should be a possibility of criticizing one's own culture and of calling in question traditions that have been well established in the name of the one thing that is absolute: the equal dignity of all persons.

2. *To adopt a way of thinking critically that enables one to uncover and denounce contradictions*, particularly those which allow one to make an exception in one's own case, that is to 'see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but … not notice the log in your own eye'

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[9] Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, chapters 3, 4, 5.

(Matthew 7:3) and to project on to another the darkness that one refuses to see in oneself—very often in matters involving religion, sex and violence. Thus, as it said in an article from *Le Monde* a few years ago about a woman journalist who had been fined in Sudan for wearing trousers, 'The wicked are precious: they offer us on a plate the chance to feel that we are both better and more intelligent.'[10] The history of relations between East and West is full of such projections and they are to be found in contemporary debates, for example that on the prohibition of the *niqab*.

3. *To have systematic recourse to 'the inner gaze'*, that is, the ability that allows us to see the world from the point of view of the other. As I have pointed out above, this is the most important element. The proof of this can be seen in the fact that those areas where the extreme Right is strongest are also those where the number of 'foreigners' is lowest. It is contact with the other that helps most to disarm fear. However, for that to happen, it is necessary to dare to enter into contact and at times to take the first step …. Such contact will surely allow me to see the world from another point of view, perhaps dissolving any fears I may have; but at the same time it will allow the other to see the world from my point of

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[10] Francis Marmande, 'Le Monde et le pantalon', *Le Monde* (15 September 2009), available at http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2009/09/15/le-monde-et-le-pantalon-par-francis-marmande_1240706_3232.html.

view, and that will help him or her to understand—from within—my reactions and the unease that may trouble me, or my other feelings. Both will be helped to enter into negotiation and to find the right balance in a given situation and in a particular society.

To Communicate in Truth

In order to do this, the principles of 'nonviolent communication' developed by the US psychologist Marshall Rosenberg prove to be particularly helpful.[11] What are they? Nonviolent communication relies on a way of speaking that reinforces our ability to maintain goodwill with the other even in very trying circumstances. We make an effort to pay attention to the way we express ourselves and the way in which we listen to the other person. Words are then no longer commonplace and automatic reactions, but become considered replies that spring from an awareness of both our own feelings and desires, and those of others. Our mode of expression is sincere and clear, regarding the other with respect and empathy. During the whole conversation, we are alert to our own deepest needs and to those of the other.

Nonviolent communication, in so far as it does away with our old tactics of defence, retreat and attack, leads us to a new perception of ourselves and of others. Thus it lessens reactions of resistance or defensiveness or aggressiveness. It consists of four components.

1. *Observation*: we observe what actually happens in a given situation. What is there in the words or acts of someone that makes me feel good or bad? It is important to pinpoint what we observe without adding any sort of value judgment: for example, 'You do not shake my hand', or 'You pray in the street'.

2. *Feelings*: we say what we feel in the presence of such actions: for example: I feel annoyed, or afraid, or hurt, or surprised, or confused, or angered, or bored, or upset, or uncertain, or unhappy, or nervous, or panicked, or worried, or saddened and so on.

3. *Needs*: we try to analyze what the needs at the root of these feelings are, such as freedom, harmony, peace, order, security, respect, love and so on.

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[11] Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication* (Encinitas: Puddle Dancer, 2003).

4. *Requests*: what is wanted from the other in order that our life may be more agreeable?

Thus, the aim of one part of nonviolent communication is to be able to express clearly to ourselves the information contained in these four components. The other aspect consists in receiving from our conversation partner what he or she has learnt in these same four areas. In other words, in listening we try to appreciate what, on the other person's part, has been observed and felt and needed, and then to identify what could contribute to his or her well-being as we listen to the fourth component, in all simplicity.

By focusing our attention on the four points, and helping the other to do the same, we set up a communication channel that leads fairly naturally to mutual good will: I spell out what I observe, feel, desire and require in order to feel better; I listen to what you observe, feel, desire and require so that you can feel better.

An important point to bear in mind here is that it is never others who are responsible for the feelings that we have. I alone am responsible for my feelings, and these feelings are dependent on a need that I have and which is fulfilled or not fulfilled. That is why the words and acts of another may be the factor that releases—but never causes—our feelings. We recognise that our feelings spring from the way in which we choose to take to heart the actions and words of others, as they do from our needs and from what we are expecting at a particular moment. By becoming aware of that, we can avoid thinking of the other as the source of our discomfort. In this way, a relation that could become explosive will disappear.

The three elements identified by Martha Nussbaum combined with the principles outlined by Marshall Rosenberg may provide us with some pointers that can help us make progress in the construction of a more inclusive society, and thus welcome into our lives and our European societies the Kingdom that is at work.

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