

ISLAM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON EUROPE TODAY

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ABSTRACT

This text examines the multifaceted and dynamic influence of Islam on contemporary Europe, extending beyond mere presence to actively shaping its political, cultural, social, and religious landscapes. It challenges simplistic narratives of conflict or incompatibility, highlighting how Islam's visibility prompts re-examinations of European identity, secularism, and multiculturalism, and introduces a “moral presence” confronting secular voids. The document critically distinguishes between the vast Islamic civilization—with its rich intellectual and spiritual heritage—and the narrow ideologies of violent extremism, arguing that the term “Islamic fundamentalism” is often misapplied and weaponized, obscuring internal diversity and critiques within Islam itself. It delves into the complexities of integration, analyzing how unidirectional European societal pressures, structural inequalities, and diverse Muslim responses contribute to ongoing tensions. The interplay between Islamophobia and Muslim alienation is explored, emphasizing the need to move beyond fear towards mutual understanding, dialogue, and a recognition of shared humanity. Throughout, the text suggests that a nuanced engagement, often drawing on an Orthodox Christian theological perspective, is crucial for addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by Islam's growing role in Europe.

Keywords: *Islam; islamophobia; tolerance; Islamism; religious conflict; interreligious dialogue;*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, Islam is not merely present in Europe, but actively shapes the political, cultural, social, and religious landscapes of the continent. From questions of identity and citizenship to discussions about law, ethics, education, and even aesthetics, the influence of Islam in contemporary Europe is both multidimensional and dynamic. Understanding this influence means moving beyond simplistic narratives of conflict or incompatibility and recognizing the evolving interaction between a historically secular-Christian Europe and one of the world's largest and fastest-growing religious communities.

As Redclift notes, “Islam is not at the margins of European society; it is woven into the fabric of its cities, classrooms, hospitals, and cultural expressions.”¹ Indeed, Europe's Muslim population – estimated at over 25 million people – is not a foreign presence, but an

¹ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain*, in: *Runnymede Perspectives – The New Muslims*, 2013, p.36.

intrinsic part of the modern European mosaic. Whether through migration, birth rates, or conversion, Islam continues to grow as both a demographic and sociological force.

One of the most significant areas of Islamic influence is in the public discourse on pluralism and secularism. In many countries – notably France, Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands – the visibility of Islam has forced societies to re-examine assumptions about national identity, religion in public life, and the limits of multiculturalism. The wearing of the hijab, the establishment of Islamic schools, regulations concerning halal food, and the construction of mosques have all become focal points of national debates, not just about religion, but about the very meaning of “Europeanness.”

According to Grinell, in the integration of Islam in Europe, the influence of Islam in Europe cannot be reduced to political controversies. It also challenges Europeans to confront the ethical void left by secularism: “Islam becomes visible not only as a difference, but also as a moral presence – a tradition with answers to questions the secular West has forgotten to ask.”² In this way, Islam reintroduces spiritual language into public conversation – about family, death, prayer, charity, justice – in societies increasingly dominated by consumerism and moral relativism.

The influence of Islam is also seen in politics, both in terms of representation and reactions adverse. Politicians, journalists, academics, and Muslim activists appear throughout Europe, offering new narratives about civic engagement and cultural belonging. At the same time, populist and far-right movements have grown in reaction, presenting Islam as a threat to European identity. This dynamic reveals not a clash of civilizations, but an internal European struggle over how to define its future in the presence of religious diversity.

Gadzhimuradova emphasizes that “Islam today functions in Europe as a kind of mirror – reflecting in Western societies anxieties, contradictions, and unresolved tensions about race, religion, history, and integration.”³ The Muslim presence raises uncomfortable questions:

- Can Europe remain democratic while restricting religious freedom?
- Can it promote pluralism while demanding cultural assimilation?

These tensions are not caused by Islam, but are made visible by its growing presence. Another area of influence is education and intellectual thought. Islamic studies departments, interfaith dialogue programs, and Muslim intellectual networks are now present in most major European universities. Theological questions, once confined to madrasas, are now debated in European journals, podcasts, and forums. Converts to Islam – such as Murad Hofmann, Hamza Yusuf, and Ingrid Mattson – have also contributed to a unique European Islamic intellectualism that combines tradition with critical reflection.

However, the influence of Islam in Europe is not without challenges. The persistence of socio-economic inequalities, residential segregation, employment discrimination, and underrepresentation in public institutions continues to affect many Muslim communities. According to one study, the influence of Islam is often constrained by “structural barriers that hinder full participation in civic and cultural life.”⁴ These barriers do not negate Islam’s influence but channel it into alternative spaces – community centers, mosques, social networks – where new forms of cultural and religious expression emerge.

² K. GRINELL, *Integration of Islam in Europe: Categorical Remarks*, *European Review*, May, 2020, pp. 1-11.

³ G. I. GADZHIMURADOVA, *Muslims in Europe: Identity crisis between “European” and “Islamic” values*, in: *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*, 12(2), 2020, pp. 133-138.

⁴ D. ELDORA, *The Spread of Islam in Europe: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Dynamics*, in: *International Journal of Science and Society*, Vol. 5, 2023, pp. 233-242.

From an Orthodox Christian perspective, this moment offers both challenge and opportunity. The encounter with Islam in modern Europe tests the Church's ability to articulate its faith in a pluralistic society. It also challenges Christians to develop a more profound theological response to religious diversity, one that moves beyond polemics or retreat. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann once said: "The Church is not called to escape from the world, but to enlighten it from within."⁵ This means engaging with Islam not only as a sociological phenomenon but also as a spiritual presence. Orthodox theology insists that the presence of Islam in Europe is not accidental, but providential – an opportunity to rediscover our own faith through encounter, dialogue, and reciprocal witness. It calls for a re-evangelization not against Islam, but in conversation with the Islamic search for transcendence, justice, and community.

1. IDEOLOGY AND EXTREMISM - ISLAMIC CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

The association of Islam with extremism has become one of the most widespread and persistent narratives in global discourse post-September 11. However, this narrative conceals a fundamental confusion: conflating a vast and complex religious civilization with the narrow ideologies of a violent minority. This confusion not only distorts public understanding of Islam but also undermines the possibility of authentic engagement with Muslim communities, who are often the primary victims of extremism.

To begin, it is essential to distinguish between Islamic culture and Islamic extremism. As de Souza explains in "Religious Fundamentalism: A Theoretical-Constitutional Analysis," fundamentalism must be understood as a modern phenomenon: "It is not the continuation of tradition, but the reactionary creation of a new form of religiosity, ideologically charged, that seeks power, not piety."⁶

In this sense, Islamic extremism – whether in the form of ISIS, Al-Qaida, or other radical groups – is not an extension of classical Islamic civilization, but a rupture from it.

Indeed, classical Islamic culture – from the Abbasid Caliphate to Al-Andalus, from Persian philosophy to Ottoman jurisprudence – was marked by profound intellectual, spiritual, and artistic contributions. As Fazlur Rahman has shown, Islamic civilization developed systems of ethics, law, theology, medicine, astronomy, and poetry that profoundly influenced the West.⁷ To reduce this tradition to the actions of violent ideologues is an injustice to both Islam and historical truth.

The ideological nature of extremism can be seen in its use of religion as a totalizing political tool. As Strenski points out in his work, modern Islamist extremism often arises from political frustration, socio-economic inequality, and post-colonial trauma, rather than theological orthodoxy: "Islamism is less a return to faith than a reaction to humiliation."⁸ In this context, religion becomes instrumentalized – stripped of its mystery, spirituality, and internal diversity – and repurposed as a vehicle for power and identity.

⁵ A. SCHMEMMANN, *For the life of the world: sacraments and orthodoxy*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973, pp.44-45.

⁶ R. L. OLIVEIRA DE SOUZA, *Religious Fundamentalism: A Theoretical-Constitutional Analysis*, in: *Cuestiones constitucionales* (49), 2023, pp. 209-262.

⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity, Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, retrieved from URL: <https://ia903207.us.archive.org/2/items/FazlurRahmanIslamandModernity/FazlurRahmanIslamandModernity.pdf> (accessed on 09.04.2025)

⁸ I. STRENSKI, *Prospects for the Death of Europe: Islam, Christianity, the Future Identity of Europe*, in: *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(3), 2020; pp. 23-24.

Such instrumentalization is not exclusive to Islam. As Volf states, any religion can be hijacked by violence when it abandons its call to transcendence and becomes an instrument of exclusion: “When God is no longer the Other who calls us to love, but the One who legitimizes the destruction of our enemies, we have ceased to worship God and have begun to worship ourselves.”⁹

In many respects, Islamic extremism is as much a symptom of modern secular failure as it is of religious zeal. As Grinnell observes, extremist ideologies emerge not in the theological heart of Islam, but in the social margins of Western urban centers, failed states, and conflict zones.¹⁰ These are environments where the search for identity, belonging, and justice meets frustration – and where simplified ideological narratives offer the illusion of clarity and control. This becomes particularly clear when examining the difference between Islamic culture and extremist ideology in the use of texts.

Classical Islamic scholars developed complex methods of Quranic interpretation (tafsir), legal reasoning (fiqh), and moral philosophy. Extremists, by contrast, engage in what Esposito calls “text-plucking” – isolating verses from their theological, historical, and linguistic context to serve a pre-existing political agenda.¹¹ Selective literalism is not a return to Islamic purity, but a distortion of its most sacred principles.

Orthodox Christianity, too, has faced moments in its history where theology was co-opted for ideological purposes – whether in the form of nationalism, political theocracy, or ecclesiastical imperialism. The patristic tradition repeatedly warns against confusing spiritual authority with political domination. Saint John Chrysostom emphasized that “the power of the Church is spiritual, not coercive. Christ conquers through love, not by the sword.” This understanding remains vital when confronting any religious community – including Islam – where power seeks to masquerade in the language of God.

Finally, the damaging consequences of equating Islam with extremism in the Western public sphere must be considered. Young European Muslims often feel caught between the pressure to “explain” terrorism in which they had no part and the desire to live their faith authentically.¹² This moral burden isolates them, suppresses spiritual growth, and alienates them from the wider society – a dynamic that, paradoxically, can strengthen the cycle of marginalization and radicalization.

While extremist ideology distorts Islamic teachings in the public eye, its most tragic consequences are felt within Muslim societies themselves. Contrary to common Western perceptions, the overwhelming majority of victims of jihadist violence are Muslims. From Iraq and Syria to Nigeria and Pakistan, communities have suffered under the brutal repression of groups that claim to defend Islam but, in fact, profane it. These movements silence Islamic pluralism, persecute minorities, and seek to eliminate centuries of theological diversity and cultural nuance.

As Marbaniang highlights, fundamentalism in the Islamic world often appears as a reaction to perceived Western intrusion combined with a loss of cultural self-confidence: “In the vacuum left by colonial fragmentation and postmodern relativism, ideological extremism

⁹ M. VOLF, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 161.

¹⁰ K. GRINELL, *Integration of Islam in Europe ...*, pp. 1-11.

¹¹ J. L. ESPOSITO, *The straight path*, New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 33-56.

¹² C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede Perspectives ...*, p. 24.

intervenes as a surrogate identity.”¹³ The search for moral certainty in an uncertain world particularly attracts the young and disenfranchised – those who feel excluded from both the promise of secular modernity and the spiritual depth of traditional religion.

This internal collapse – not of Islam, but of societal structures that support healthy religious life – makes Muslim societies vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Educational institutions suffer from underinvestment, theological authority is fragmented, and access to authentic religious discourse is often drowned out by politicized sermons or the influence of social media figures with radical agendas. As Popovska et al. mention, the solution lies not only in external regulation but in reinvigorating religious literacy, community dialogue, and cultural confidence within Islam itself.¹⁴

However, a large part of Western society continues to treat Islam as a monolith, failing to distinguish between radical deviations and mainstream traditions. Media coverage commonly confuses Islamic theology with the actions of marginal groups. This combination is shown to have direct consequences on integration efforts: “When Islam is seen as ideologically rigid and inherently violent, Muslims are viewed not as neighbors, but as potential threats.”¹⁵ This fact affects everything from public policies to daily interactions, reinforcing suspicion and social segregation.

This tendency also produces a feedback loop between fear and alienation. Drawing on the narrative of ShaMohammadi et al., one of the greatest obstacles to peace is “attributing collective guilt to entire communities based on the actions of a few.”¹⁶ Such collective suspicion impedes dialogue, strengthens defensive identities, and ironically reinforces the very isolationism on which extremist ideology thrives.

To move forward, it is essential to recognize that Islamic civilization, in its classical form, embodies values and principles compatible with peace, dignity, and the common good. These include reverence for knowledge, legal deliberation, charity, hospitality, and respect before God. As Rahman, one of the most respected modern Islamic academics, argues: “The spirit of Islam is ethical universalism – not ideological narrowness.”¹⁷

Orthodox Christianity, in its own tradition of profound theology, prayer, and asceticism, is uniquely positioned to recognize the spiritual depths of Islamic civilization, even while maintaining theological differences. The Orthodox notion of apophaticism – the mystery of God beyond human categories – invites Christians to approach other faiths with pious humility, not judgment. As Saint Gregory Palama taught: “We know God not by what He is, but by what He is not.” We observe the recognition of divine mystery which creates space for respectful interreligious engagement.

In this spirit, the Orthodox Church can contribute to public understanding by challenging the reduction of Islam to ideology, while simultaneously affirming the

¹³ D. MARBANIANG, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Order: A Philosophical Perspective*, Paper presented at the National Seminar on Religious Fundamentalism and Social Order Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, February 26-27, 2011, pp. 5-8.

¹⁴ B. POPOVSKA, Z. RISTOSKA, & P. PAYET, *The role of interreligious and interfaith dialogue in the post-secular world*, 2017, pp. 38-39.

¹⁵ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede Perspectives ...*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ JOURNAL OF ISLAM AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, *Management of Social Conflicts from the Point of View of Islam with Emphasis on Social Relationships*, Islam & Social sciences, Vol.11, No.22, Autumn & Winter 2019-2020, pp. 47-69.

¹⁷ Fazlur RAHMAN, *Islam & Modernity, Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, retrieved from URL: <https://ia903207.us.archive.org/2/items/FazlurRahmanIslamandModernity/FazlurRahmanIslamandModernity.pdf> (accessed on 09.04.2025)

importance of theological discernment. The Church must reject both the fearful overgeneralization of Islam and a naive romanticism that denies the real dangers posed by radical ideologies. True Christian witness consists in navigating this tension with wisdom, prayer, and prophetic clarity. Ultimately, interreligious collaboration can play a vital role in combating extremism – not by diluting religious truths, but by uplifting common ethical commitments. As al-Tayyeb describes in the “Document on Human Fraternity,” “Religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood.”¹⁸ A joint declaration – coming from the highest authorities in both Catholicism and Islam – affirms a path forward: one rooted not in mutual suspicion, but in shared responsibility.

2. THE MYTH OF FUNDAMENTALISM AND ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

The word “fundamentalism” has become a rhetorical shorthand in both academic and popular discourse, used to label individuals and movements perceived as radical, anti-modern, or absolutist. Although initially coined in early 20th-century Protestant America to refer to the defense of core Christian doctrines against liberal theology, the term has since been generalized to describe a wide variety of religious and political behaviors. In particular, “Islamic fundamentalism” has emerged as a highly politicized and often misleading category, frequently applied without precision, historical context, or theological depth.

Rodrigo Lobato, in his constitutional analysis, rightly warns against the use of “fundamentalism” as a general pejorative: “The term has been secularized and weaponized. It no longer refers to a specific religious position, but is used to isolate, delegitimize, and securitize the religious other.”¹⁹ This shift from descriptive to normative language has profound implications for how Islam is perceived and treated in public life – especially when “Islamic fundamentalism” is treated as synonymous with extremism or terrorism.

The myth that Islam is inherently prone to fundamentalism has been reinforced by several factors: media narratives, the politicization of religion after September 11, the rise of transnational jihadist movements, and the strategic use of “Islamic fundamentalism” by Western governments as a rhetorical justification for foreign policy decisions. As El Younssi observes, “Islam has been assigned a unique status as a global religion of suspicion, its sacred texts interpreted not by theologians, but by intelligence analysts.”²⁰

The consequences of this myth are multiple. First, it creates a false dichotomy between Islam and modernity. By presenting Islamic tradition as frozen in time and opposed to progress, it conceals vibrant internal debates within Islam about ethics, politics, gender, and spirituality.

Second, it flattens the diversity of Muslim expression – reducing centuries of theological schools, spiritual movements, legal frameworks, and regional traditions to a single caricature of rigidity and violence.

Redclift et al. highlight how this binary affects young Muslims in Europe: “They are either seen as secularized and acceptable, or religious and radical – there is no space for

¹⁸ POPE FRANCIS, on his Apostolic Journey of His Holiness to the United Arab Emirates (3-5.02.2019), a Document on Human Fraternity for world peace and living together, retrieved from URL: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed on 07.04.2025)

¹⁹ R. L. OLIVEIRA DE SOUZA, *Religious Fundamentalism ...*, pp. 209-262.

²⁰ A. EL YOUNSSI, *Islam and Muslims: A Threat to, or a Victim of, Western Hegemony?*. in: *The End of Western Hegemonies?*, Series in Politics, Vernon Press, 2022, p. 217.

religious sincerity without political suspicion.”²¹ This forces many Muslims to choose between cultural invisibility and social rejection.

Furthermore, the “fundamentalist” label is rarely applied consistently across all religions. As Strenski argues in his publication, “Christian or Jewish fundamentalism is usually treated as a marginal phenomenon, while Islamic fundamentalism is seen as representative.”²² This resulting asymmetry reveals that what is often labeled “Islamic fundamentalism” may say more about Western fears than about Islamic theology. In this way, the myth of Islamic fundamentalism functions as a mirror for Europe’s own post-Christian anxieties.

On the other hand, it is important to examine how the term “fundamentalism” fails to do justice to the internal complexity of Islamic revivalist movements. Not all forms of Islamic conservatism or traditionalism are violent, anti-modern, or anti-democratic. Many movements – such as the Deobandi tradition in South Asia or certain quietist Salafi schools – promote scriptural literalism without endorsing political violence. To label all these as “fundamentalist” is not only intellectually lazy but also unjust.

The Orthodox Christian tradition offers valuable perspectives on how one might approach such internal diversity without falling into condemnation or caricature. The Church Fathers, especially the Cappadocians, insisted that true theology begins with listening, not with polemics. As Saint Gregory Nazianzen wrote, “To know God is first to stand in silence before His mystery.” Such a disposition calls Christians to approach Islamic revivalist movements not with labels, but with questions:

- What are they reacting to?
- What are they protecting?
- What fears or hopes animate their theology?

Ultimately, the myth of Islamic fundamentalism often eclipses fundamentalist tendencies within secular ideologies. As Marbaniang argues, the danger lies not only in religious absolutism but also in secular dogmatism, which refuses to recognize the limits of its own frameworks: “Fundamentalism is not the opposite of reason; it is the absolutization of any system – religious, political, or scientific – with no room for humility or dissent.”²³

In this light, Islamic fundamentalism should not be treated as a unique pathology, but as part of a broader human tendency to seek security in certainty, especially in times of crisis. This temptation – not Islam itself – is what leads to intolerance, violence, and exclusion.

While Western narratives frequently externalize the problem of fundamentalism as something to be “contained” or “countered,” many of the most profound critiques of Islamic extremism and fundamentalist ideology come from within the Islamic tradition itself. Muslim academics, jurists, and thinkers have long recognized that political violence and theological rigidity contradict the spiritual foundations of their faith. Internal critique, however, is often ignored in Western media and policymaking, thereby reinforcing the myth that Islam is passive or complicit in the face of radicalism.

Salaudeen notes in his research that classical Islamic civilization was “able to develop frameworks for theological disagreement, legal diversity, and peaceful coexistence without abandoning orthodoxy.”²⁴ The Islamic intellectual tradition includes sophisticated

²¹ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede Perspectives* ..., pp. 37-39.

²² I. STRENSKI, *Prospects for the Death of Europe* ..., pp. 20-23.

²³ D. MARBANIANG, *Religious Fundamentalism* ..., pp. 2-3.

²⁴ A. SALAUDEEN, *A Review of Islam and Secularism*. Vol 1, 2025, pp. 59-63.

debates between Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites, legal schools such as Hanafi and Maliki, and spiritual movements like Sufism; traditions that offer theological resources to critique extremism from within – not as Western impositions, but as faithful expressions of Islam itself. Moreover, prominent contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Mustafa Akyol, have emphasized the need to return to the ethical core of Islam, centered on justice, mercy, and the pursuit of knowledge. They stress that extremism stems not from doctrinal integrity, but from the erosion of religious authority and the fragmentation of sacred knowledge. In many Muslim-majority societies, the collapse of traditional institutions – such as universities, seminaries, and Sufi orders – has created a vacuum filled by populist preachers, online influencers, and radical ideologues.

As Alexander et al. point out in their study, “A significant factor in radicalization is the dislocation of religious identity from community structures and elder mediation.”²⁵ This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young European Muslims, who often lack access to authentic spiritual formation and are thus vulnerable to simplistic and militant interpretations of Islam. The response to this crisis is not surveillance or repression, but reinvestment in theological depth, mentorship, and religious community.

The myth of fundamentalism also ignores the reality that fundamentalist tendencies exist in all religious traditions – including Christianity. The Orthodox Church, for example, has had to contend with its own forms of extremism, especially in post-communist contexts where nationalism and religion have sometimes dangerously intertwined. The Orthodox Church's experience of resisting both totalitarian ideologies and ethnocentric distortions of the Gospel gives it a unique voice in critiquing all forms of fundamentalism – religious or secular.

From a theological perspective, Orthodoxy understands fundamentalism as a spiritual pathology: a confusion of truth with control, piety with coercion, and the mystery of God with human certainty. Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae wrote: “Dogma is not a boundary to limit God, but a way to protect the Church's vision as it walks humbly towards the Infinite.”²⁶ This understanding challenges Christians to avoid similar temptations: to impose rather than propose, to dominate rather than dialogue.

Christian engagement with Muslims – especially regarding the subject of fundamentalism – must therefore be based not on suspicion, but on pastoral realism and theological hope. It must affirm that the solution to violence in God's name is not less religion, but more authentic religion – deeply rooted in tradition, humility, and service to the human person. As Pope Francis affirmed in his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, “Religious violence does not stem from religion, but from its misinterpretation and exploitation for extraneous purposes.”²⁷

Thus, the challenge is twofold: for Muslim communities to continue the difficult work of theological reform, reclaiming the soul of their tradition from ideological abuse; and for Christians, especially Orthodox Christians, to engage with Islam not as a problem to be solved, but as a tradition to be understood and a people to be loved.

²⁵ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *The New Muslims – Introduction*, in: Runnymede Trust, London, 2013, pp. 3-4.

²⁶ D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatica Ortodoxa*, vol. I. Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București. 2003, pp. 52-55.

²⁷ POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship, retrieved from URL: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed on 03.04.2025)

3. THE PROBLEM OF INTEGRATION

The integration of Muslim populations into European societies has become one of the most intensely debated and politicized issues of the 21st century. From public debates about the hijab and halal food to broader anxieties concerning national identity, security, and religious freedom, the issue of Muslim integration has served as both a mirror and a pressure point – exposing profound uncertainties within European democracies about pluralism, secularism, and the legacy of colonialism.

Essentially, the concept of “integration” is not neutral. It reflects assumptions about who sets the norms of belonging and what it means to be “European.” According to Grinell’s observations, integration is often treated as a unidirectional process: “Muslims are expected to adapt to dominant cultural frameworks without reciprocal adjustments from host societies.”²⁸ This asymmetry reinforces a hierarchy where the Muslim is permanently positioned as a guest, stranger, or “other” – regardless of citizenship, generation, or social contribution. This model of integration is particularly problematic in secular contexts like France, where *laïcité* (state secularism) imposes strict limits on the public expression of religion. Although officially applied to all faiths, Muslims often feel disproportionately targeted, especially when policies seem designed to regulate Muslim visibility. In the case of France’s ban on face coverings in public, many Muslims argue that such legislation signals not neutrality, but cultural exclusion. Gadzhimuradova argues: “Integration becomes a coded language for assimilation – and those who resist are labeled extremists or enemies of the Republic.”²⁹

In contrast, some countries – notably Great Britain and the Netherlands – have experimented with multicultural models that allow for greater religious and cultural pluralism. However, even these approaches have faced criticism, with claims that they promote “parallel societies” or fail to foster common national values. The tensions discussed reveal a paradox: Europe simultaneously demands integration and fears it – especially when integration does not result in religious invisibility.

Hussain highlights how this tension affects young Muslims: “They are caught between contradictory expectations – from mainstream society to assimilate and from their families to preserve cultural identity. This produces internal conflict, confusion, and, in some cases, disengagement from both spheres.”³⁰ Instead of promoting cohesion, current models of integration often contribute to alienation – which, in turn, is exploited by radical ideologues offering identity and belonging.

Furthermore, the economic dimension of integration is often overlooked. High unemployment, housing segregation, and limited access to quality education disproportionately affect Muslim communities in Europe. Structural inequalities are often interpreted as signs of cultural failure, rather than systemic injustice. As a study on the management of social conflicts from an Islamic perspective note, “True integration requires not only cultural dialogue, but also economic inclusion and social justice.”³¹

Religious institutions also play a vital role in the integration process. Mosques, Islamic centers, and community organizations often provide social services, education, and spaces for identity formation. However, these same institutions are often subject to control or surveillance, especially in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. This fosters a climate of

²⁸ K. GRINELL, *Integration of Islam in Europe ...*, pp. 1-11.

²⁹ G. I. GADZHIMURADOVA, *Muslims in Europe ...*, pp. 133-138.

³⁰ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede Perspectives ...*, pp. 13-15.

³¹ JOURNAL OF ISLAM AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, *Management of Social Conflicts ...*, pp. 50-55.

suspicion that undermines trust and discourages collaboration. Fokas emphasizes that “integration cannot succeed where communities are presumed guilty until proven innocent.”³²

From a theological perspective, the Orthodox Church can offer a unique voice in the integration debate. Orthodox anthropology affirms the dignity and singularity of each human person (prosopon) – not as a representative of a group, but as a bearer of God’s image. This means that every person, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or background, has a place in the polis (society). Therefore, integration must begin with recognition, not suspicion. On the other hand, Orthodox theology reminds us that integration is not just a political or cultural task, but a spiritual vocation – a call to live together in truth and mutual responsibility. The Church Fathers speak of koinonia – communion – as the ideal of human coexistence. This does not erase difference, but transfigures it into relational harmony. In the context of religious pluralism, this vision challenges Christians to see the presence of Muslims in Europe not as a problem, but as an opportunity for witness, hospitality, and common ethical work. The vision discussed also provokes the Church to self-examination. Orthodox communities in Europe must reflect on their own openness – or lack thereof – towards Muslims and other minorities. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann taught: “The mission of the Church is not to create ghettos of the saved, but to sanctify the world through love.”³³ Love must extend to Muslim neighbors – not only as beneficiaries of aid or targets of conversion, but as fellow human beings who share the burdens and hopes of European society.

4. FEAR OF ISLAM AND THE REFUSAL OF MUSLIMS TO INTEGRATE

The discourse on Muslim integration in Europe is often shaped by mutual perceptions of mistrust. On one hand, segments of European society express fear – fear that Islam threatens liberal values, national identity, and social cohesion. On the other hand, some Muslim communities respond with resistance, real or perceived, to adopting certain Western norms. The resulting tension reinforces a narrative of incompatibility, which hinders authentic coexistence and mutual understanding.

The fear of Islam – often termed Islamophobia – is not a simple emotional reaction, but a complex socio-political phenomenon rooted in historical experiences, media representations, and securitized narratives. As Redclift et al. explain in their publication, “Islam is persistently framed as a cultural and ideological threat rather than a religious presence, leading to a politics of suspicion rather than dialogue.”³⁴ This perception is amplified during periods of crisis – terrorist attacks, waves of immigration, or social unrest – when Muslims as a whole are treated as potentially dangerous, regardless of individual behavior or belief. Such generalizations have led to discriminatory policies and hostile social environments in various European countries. In the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, measures such as banning religious attire, limiting mosque construction, and surveilling Muslim organizations have contributed to a climate of alienation. As Strenski notes in “Prospects for the Death of Europe,” “The West’s fear of Islam reflects its own spiritual insecurity – a vacuum of meaning onto which the figure of the Muslim is projected as an existential adversary.”³⁵ Generalized fear leads to a perilous assumption: that the burden of

³² E. FOKAS, *Islam In Europe The Unexceptional Case*, in: *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 24, 2011, pp. 1-17.

³³ A. SCHMEMMANN, *For the life of the world ...*, pp. 36-38.

³⁴ C. E. ALEXANDER, V. REDCLIFT, & A. HUSSAIN, *Runnymede Perspectives ...*, pp. 3-7.

³⁵ I. STRENSKI, *Prospects for the Death of Europe ...*, pp. 4-5.

integration rests solely on Muslims, and that any form of cultural or religious distinctiveness is a form of resistance or even subversion. Integration is no longer seen as a reciprocal adaptation, but as a loyalty test, in which Muslims must prove their civic trustworthiness by visibly abandoning traditional practices or religious expressions.

In response, some Muslims develop defensive attitudes. Resistance can take various forms – from passive disengagement and retreat into ethnic enclaves, to active rejection of Western norms perceived as contrary to Islamic ethics. Although such reactions are not universal, they are significant enough to shape public perceptions and consolidate the cycle of mistrust. According to Gadzhimuradova, “Where Muslims feel rejected, they may come to reject the society that excludes them – not out of hostility, but as a means of preserving dignity and identity.”³⁶

The refusal to integrate must, however, be understood in its sociological and historical context. In many cases, it is not religious doctrine, but structural exclusion and cultural stigmatization that led to alienation. High unemployment, discrimination in housing and education, and a lack of political representation contribute to a sense of marginalization. A study on the management of social conflicts highlights that “Muslims’ reluctance to integrate often reflects not a lack of desire, but a lack of preparedness – a protective response to environments where their values are not respected and their presence is unwelcome.”³⁷

Furthermore, the experience of Islamophobia can itself be radicalizing. When Muslims are constantly portrayed as foreign or threatening, some may internalize these portrayals and turn to radical interpretations of Islam as a way to reclaim agency and pride. Popovska et al. note regarding the role of interreligious dialogue: “Exclusion breeds polarization, and polarization makes dialogue almost impossible unless both sides take conscious steps towards trust.”³⁸

Here, theology becomes crucial. From a Christian-Orthodox perspective, fear of the other is not a political virtue, but a spiritual illness – a symptom of estrangement from the Gospel. The Orthodox Church, with its theology of the image of God in every human being, calls believers to reject fear and embrace kenotic love – a love that empties itself of prejudice, pride, and control to receive the other as a gift.

CONCLUSION

Saint John of Kronstadt teaches us: “The Christian heart is wide, open to every sorrow and joy – because God Himself has made it His temple.”³⁹ The vision above compels Christians to see the presence of Muslims not as a threat, but as an invitation: to bear witness to the Gospel not through domination, but through service, presence, and hospitality. At the same time, this theology offers a framework for understanding the resistance of Muslim communities not as rebellion, but as a human response to exclusion and fear.

Moreover, Orthodox communities in Europe must ask themselves hard questions:

- Are we creating spaces for encounter with Muslims in our neighborhoods?
- Are our parishes centers of welcome or centers of retreat?
- Do we speak about Islam in public discourse with love, or are we complicit in its denigration through silence?

³⁶ G. I. GADZHIMURADOVA, *Muslims in Europe ...*, pp. 133-138.

³⁷ JOURNAL OF ISLAM AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, *Management of Social Conflicts ...*, pp. 55-56.

³⁸ B. POPOVSKA, Z. RISTOSKA, & P. PAYET, *The role of interreligious and interfaith dialogue ...*, pp. 37-38

³⁹ SAINT JOHN OF KRONSTADT, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, Holy Trinity Monastery Press, 1890, p. 38.

The future of Europe depends on how these questions are answered. The fear of Islam and the refusal of Muslims to integrate are not permanent realities; they are relational wounds. Their healing requires courage, empathy, and truth. It demands that Muslims be recognized not as intruders, but as neighbors – and that European societies re-engage with pluralism not as mere tolerance, but as a spiritual and civic vocation.

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