



## ISLAM AND THE WEST: A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

**Events:** The Pew Research Center estimated that the total number of Muslims living in Europe (excluding Turkey) in 2016 was 25.8 million (4.9% of the entire population). In the early post-1945 period, immigration mainly came from former colonies. The majority of France's Muslim population (at 5.7 million, the largest in Europe) thus have a heritage in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, while most of the UK's Muslims (4.1 million) came originally from Pakistan. Later Muslim immigration has often been linked to war and civil strife in countries such as Syria, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. Nevertheless, in recent years several incidents have raised issues about the relationship between Western European states in particular and, at least, elements in their Muslim populations. These incidents include the following:

- The 1989 'Rushdie affair', in which Muslim protesters in several countries denounced Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as blasphemous and Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa condemning the author to death
- The 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh, a Dutch film director who had collaborated on a film criticizing the treatment of women in Muslim countries
- The 2004 Madrid train bombings, carried out by an 'al-Qaeda-inspired' group
- The 2005 'Danish cartoons affair', in which the publication of 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* provoked protests across the Muslim world
- The 2005 London bombings, carried out by so-called 'home-grown' Islamist terrorists.
- The 2015 coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris and the 2016 cargo truck attack in Nice.

**Significance:** The existence of significant Muslim populations in the West has been seen by some as a threat to social cohesion and possibly national security. Such a view is in line with Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis, which suggests that Islamic values and beliefs are fundamentally incompatible with those of the liberal-democratic West. Clashes over issues such as whether protecting 'sacred' beliefs justifies the curtailment of free speech and press freedom thus highlight a more profound divide over whether the public realm should be strictly secular, or shaped by Islamic ideas and values. As, in this view, Islam is anti-liberal and anti-pluralist,



the politics of cultural recognition threatens to entrench Muslim separatism and sow the seeds of civic conflict. The most appropriate response to Muslim communities in the West is therefore to reject multiculturalism and insist on a strategy of integration. Such a stance has been adopted most clearly in France, where, in 2004, a law was passed forbidding the wearing of any 'ostentatious' religious articles, including Islamic headscarves, in state-funded schools, with a ban on the wearing of face-covering headgear, including niqabs and other veils, in public places coming into force in 2011.

Others, however, view multiculturalism as the most appropriate response to what has been called the 'Muslim question'. From this perspective, the image of Muslims in the West as an 'enemy within' is based on a serious misrepresentation of Islam and of the views of Muslim populations. Surveys, for instance, consistently show that Muslims in the Europe are predominantly satisfied with the secular nature of Western society and hold political views little different from other cultural groups. Moreover, when Muslim identity politics has become entangled with extremism, even violence, this is better explained by social or political factors than by cultural incompatibility. Muslim communities in Europe, for example, tend to be socially marginalized, facing higher unemployment and poverty rates, and having lower educational achievement than the general population. Moreover, international developments since 9/11 have seen a range of Western states participating in wars against and occupations of Muslim countries. In this light, the politics of cultural recognition is likely to weaken the trend towards extremism and violence, by giving Muslim populations a clearer stake in society. On the other hand, a strategy of 'enforced' integration is likely to be counter-productive, in that it is interpreted as evidence of 'Islamophobia' and helps to deepen alienation and resentment.