

At odds in Europe over differing visions of multiculturalism

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Berna Turam discusses tensions between secular states and their Muslim populations. Photo by Mary Knox Merrill

The government of Germany has announced that it will place more stringent demands on all immigrants in an effort to better integrate them into society. Since then, a growing debate about multiculturalism has brought to light issues of religious and cultural intolerance in Germany and across the globe.

Associate Professor of International Affairs Berna Turam, the author of "Between Islam and the State: the Politics of Engagement," offers insight into the tensions that exist between secular states like Germany and their Muslim populations. Turam teaches in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University.

What are the political implications of these negative viewpoints toward immigrants, especially Muslims, proliferating throughout Germany?

Muslims have come to the forefront of the debates on immigration and citizenship in Europe, particularly in Germany. Four million Muslims live in Germany, most of whom are "Gastarbeiter" (immigrant laborers) and their descendents from Turkey, who have been accepted since the 1960s.

However, Germany is not alone in this matter, and must be situated in the larger geographic and sociopolitical context. Western Europe consists of countries that are self-confident in their secular democracies and human rights. Recently, these democracies have been increasingly challenged by the growing presence and participation of Muslims in daily life, institutions and polity. The Danish cartoon flap, in which an anti-immigrant party had a contest to draw images that ridiculed the [prophet Muhammad](#), was followed by several other controversial events, such as the French ban on Islamic headscarves, the ban of minarets in Switzerland, and finally the poll in Germany, which revealed a popular demand for the restriction of religious practices of Muslims in Germany.

What are these leading democracies of the world missing that they fail to accommodate Muslim immigrants, their piety and religious ways of life? Many scholars and politicians answer this question by pointing to the failure of multiculturalism and the type of nationalism in a given nation-state. But as a political sociologist, I would like to highlight another issue here: the global challenge of religious faith, particularly public practices of Muslims, to secular democracies.

While the recent debate relates to all immigrants, Muslims are being singled out. Why has the spotlight

turned to Islam specifically?

Unlike the United States and Canada, European nation-states have had a much harder time responding to the demands of the pious, particularly the demands of Muslims for public displays of Islam. There are two major reasons. First, secularism, defined broadly as the separation of religion and politics, has had a different historical trajectory in Northwestern Europe, as it set nonnegotiable and often hostile walls between the state and the church, which pushed religion away from the public to the private sphere. Second, as the nation- and state-building of these old European democracies have not been based on the idea of "cohabitation" of immigrants, they have had difficulty dealing with the rapidly growing Muslim population, their agency, freedom and demands.

Should Muslim immigrants be expected to assimilate to the culture and language in non-Muslim countries? How can they navigate issues of cultural identity?

In the European context, "multiculturalism" has become a proxy for "immigrant assimilation." Considering the historical and political nature of these Western states and their failure to respond to new demands of pious Muslims, it would be a mistake to blame these immigrants for the failure of multiculturalism. To the contrary, making good Danes or Germans out of Muslim Turks violates the basic principles of multiculturalism properly understood.

Multiculturalism succeeds in countries like Canada, where the state makes a conscious effort to maintain immigrants' cultural, ethnic and religious identities and communities. Hence, the fact that Muslims in [Germany](#) refuse to assimilate does not suggest the failure of multiculturalism, but the failure of state accommodation of Muslims.

How will recent events affect the perception of Muslim culture and religion globally? What can ultimately be learned from this situation on issues of immigration and tolerance?

Contrary to Eurocentric views of politics, democratization must be understood as a never-ending process across the globe, and a duty of responsibility for all states. Rather than obsessing with the consolidation of democracy, ongoing democratization must be encouraged and institutionalized as a means of maintaining the dialogue between the states and ordinary people, particularly immigrants.

Diasporas, including those of Muslim populations, play a major role in demanding and pressuring self-confident secular democracies. They have come to the forefront to remind these states of the constant need for re-adaptation to the demands of globalization.

Because Muslims in Europe find themselves challenging the narcissistic tendencies of these states, which have little capacity for self-doubt and empathy for others, Muslim [immigrants](#) have increasingly come to be seen as the problem child of European civility.

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