

Islam: The Most Rapidly Expanding Religion in Europe

H A R U N Y A H Y A

During the last 20 years, the number of Muslims in the world has been increasing steadily. Statistics for the year 1973 indicate that the world population of Muslims was 500 million; now, it has reached 1.5 billion. Today, every fourth person is a Muslim. It is probable that the Muslim population will continue to increase and that Islam will become the world's largest religion. The reason for this steady rise is not only the increasing population in Muslim countries, but also the growing numbers of people who are turning to Islam, a phenomenon that has gained momentum, especially after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (hereinafter referred to as 9/11). This attack, deplored by everyone, especially Muslims, has suddenly turned people's attention (especially Americans) to Islam. People in the West are talking a lot about what kind of a religion Islam is, what the Qur'an says, what obligations come with being a Muslim, and how Muslims are required to conduct their affairs. This interest has naturally brought about a rise in the number of people worldwide turning to Islam. So, the commonly heard prediction after 9/11 that "this attack will change the course of world history" has, in a sense, started to come true. The process of returning to religious and spiritual values, which the world has been experiencing for a long time, has become a turning to Islam.

The extraordinary nature of what is taking place can be seen when one sets out these developments regarding this trend, which we have started to read about in newspapers or hear of in television reports. These developments, generally reported as just one element of the day's agenda, are actually very important indications that Islamic moral values have begun to spread very rapidly across the whole world. As in the rest of the world, Islam is in the midst of a rapid growth in Europe. This development has been attracting more attention in recent years, as evidenced by the many theses, reports, and articles published on "the place of Muslims in Europe" and "dialogue between European society and Muslims." Along with these academic reports, the media has carried frequent reports about Islam and Muslims. The root of this interest lies in the continual growth of Muslim population figures in Europe, and that this increase cannot be ascribed solely to immigration. While immigration certainly has had a significant effect on the Muslim population's growth, so many researchers have addressed this matter for quite another reason: high conversion rates. A June 20 2004 story on NTV News, headed "Islam is the most rapidly expanding religion in Europe," dealt with a report drawn up by the French domestic intelligence agency. The report stated that the number of those converting to Islam in Western countries had risen still further, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. For example, the number of converts to Islam in France increased by between 30 and 40,000 last year alone.

The Catholic Church and the Rise of Islam

The Roman Catholic Church, headquartered in Vatican City, is one of the institutions that follows conversion trends. One of the main topics during the October 1999 meeting of the European synod, which was attended by almost all of the Catholic clergy, was the Church's position in the new millennium. The conference's main theme was the rapid growth of Islam in Europe. *The National Catholic Reporter* reported that some radical individuals stated that the only way to prevent Muslims' gaining power in Europe was to stop tolerating Muslims and Islam; other more objective and rational individuals underscored the fact that since the two religions believe in one God, there should be no room for any conflict or struggle between them. In one session, Archbishop Karl Lehmann of Germany stressed that there is more internal pluralism within Islam than many Christians perceive, and that the radicals' claims about Islam had no basis in truth. (1)

Considering the position of Muslims when elucidating the Church's position in the new millennium was quite proper, for a 1999 United Nations' survey showed that between 1989 and 1998, Europe's Muslim population grew by more than 100 percent. It is reported that there are some 13 million Muslims living in Europe today: 3.2 million in Germany, 2 million in Great Britain, 4-5 million in France, and the rest dispersed over Europe as a whole, especially in the Balkans. This figure represents more than 2% of the total population of Europe. (2)

Muslims' Religious Awareness Is Rising in Europe

Relevant research also has revealed that while the number of Muslims in Europe continues to grow, there is a deepening of religious awareness among Muslims. According to a survey conducted by the French newspaper *Le Monde* in October 2001, compared to data collected in 1994, many Muslims continue to perform their prayers, go

to the mosque, and fast. This awareness is seen much more among university students.(3)

In a report based upon the foreign press in 1999, the Turkish Aktüel magazine stated that Western researchers estimate that in another 50 years Europe will become one of Islam's main centers of expansion.

Islam Is an Inseparable Part of Europe

Along with this sociological and demographic research, we also must not forget that Europe has not become acquainted with Islam only recently, but that Islam is actually an inseparable part of Europe.

Europe and the realm of Islam have had close relations with each other for centuries. First, the state of Andalusia (756-1492) on the Iberian Peninsula, and later the Crusades (1095-1291) and the Ottoman capture of the Balkans (1389), brought about a constant interrelation between the two societies. Many historians and sociologists assert today that Islam was the leading cause of Europe's movement from the darkness of its Middle Ages to the brilliance of its Renaissance. At a time when Europe was backward in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and many other fields, Muslims possessed a vast treasure of knowledge and great possibilities of development.

Uniting on a Common Ground: "Monotheism"

The growth of Islam is also reflected in the recent growth of interfaith dialogue. These dialogues start by stating that the three monotheistic religions have a common beginning and can come together at a common point. Such dialogues have been quite successful and have engendered an important rapprochement, especially between Christians and Muslims. In the Qur'an, God informs us that Muslims invite the People of the Book (Christians and Jews) to unite on a common ground:

Say: "O People of the Book, come to a proposition that is the same for us and you-that we should worship none but God, and not associate any partners with Him, and not take one another as lords besides God." If they turn away, say: "Bear witness that we are Muslims." (Qur'an, 3: 64)

The three monotheistic religions have common beliefs and the same moral values. Belief in God's Existence and Unity, angels, Prophets, the Last Day, Heaven and Hell are their basic tenets of faith. Furthermore, self-sacrifice, humility, love, tolerance, respect, mercy, honesty, avoiding wrongdoing and injustice, and acting according to conscience are all commonly accepted moral qualities. Therefore, since these three religions are on the same level, they must work together to eradicate the strife, conflict, and pain caused by irreligious ideologies. When considered from this point of view, interfaith dialogue assumes far more importance. The seminars and conferences that bring representatives of these religions together, and the messages of peace and brotherhood that come out of them, have continued regularly since the mid-1990s.

The Glad Tidings of a Holy Age

When all the facts are brought together, they reveal that there is a strong movement toward Islam in many countries, and that Islam is increasingly becoming the most important topic of world interest. These developments indicate that the world is moving toward a totally new era, one in which, God willing, Islam will gain in importance and the Qur'an's moral teachings will spread like a rising tide. It is important to realize that this highly significant development was announced in the Qur'an 14 centuries ago:

They desire to extinguish God's Light with their mouths. But God refuses to do other than perfect His Light, even though the unbelievers detest it. It is He Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the True Religion to exalt it over every other religion, even though the idolaters detest it. (Qur'an, 9:32-33)

The spread of Islamic morality is one of God's promises to believers. In addition to these verses, many sayings of our Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, assert that the Qur'an's moral teachings will prevail. In the last days before the end of the world, humanity will experience a period in which wrongdoing, injustice, deceit, fraud, wars, strife, conflict, and moral degeneration is wide-spread. Then will come the Golden Age, in which these moral teachings will begin to spread among people like a rising tide and finally prevail throughout the world. Some of these sayings, as well learned commentaries upon them, are given below:

During this [period], my ummah [people] would lead such a comfortable and carefree life which they never led like that. [The land] would bring forth its yield and would not hold back anything and the property at that time would be a stack. (Sunan Ibn-i Majah)

... The dwellers of the heavens and the earth will be pleased. The earth will bring forth all that grows, and the heavens will pour down rains in abundance. From all the good that God will bestow on the inhabitants of the earth, the living will wish that the dead would come to life again. (Muhkhtasar Tazkirah Qurtubi, p. 437)

The earth would turn like the silver tray growing vegetation... (Sunan Ibn-i Majah)

The earth will be filled with equity and justice as it was previously filled with oppression and tyranny. (Abu Dawud)

Justice will prevail to such an extent that every possession taken by force will be returned to his owner; furthermore, some other person's thing, even if it rests within one's teeth, will be given back to its owner... Security will permeate all over Earth and even a few ladies will be able to fulfil their hajj without the company of men. (Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, Al-Qawl al-Mukhtasar, p. 23)

Based upon these statements, the Golden Age will be an era in which justice, plenty, abundance, well-being, security, peace, and brotherhood will prevail among humanity, and one in which people will experience love, self-sacrifice, tolerance, compassion, mercy, and loyalty. In his sayings, our Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, says that this blessed period will be experienced through the mediation of the Mahdi, who will come in the end times to save the world from chaos, injustice, and moral collapse. He will eradicate godless ideologies and bring an end to the prevailing injustice. Moreover, he will make religion like it was in the days of our Prophet (peace be upon him), cause the Qur'an's moral teachings to prevail among humanity, and establish peace and well-being throughout the world.

The rise of Islam being experienced in the world today, as well as Turkey's role in the new era are important signs that the period announced in the Qur'an and in our Prophet's sayings is very close. It is our heartfelt desire that God will let us witness this blessed time.

References:

1. "Europe's Muslims in Worry Bishops," National Catholic Reporter, October 22, 1999
2. "Muslims in Europe," The Economist, October 18, 2001.
3. Time, December 24, 2001.