

Europe and its Muslims: Building a Common Future (Japan)

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Tackling Fear and Building Trust: Society's Collective Responsibility

We will now turn to the second part of this speech, which concerns the responsibilities of European countries. What I have previously been talking about would be easier if this was the only part of the process, that is, if the problems only had to be tackled from the Muslim side of things. But in Europe today, we are facing problems.

The first one is fear. We are dealing with a state of fear and mistrust. The reality is that there is a great deal of mistrust between citizens, and there are three things that could explain this mistrust. The first is that after the Second World War, and especially within the last 20 years, Muslims became more visible in Western societies. In fact, for decades the Muslims were in the suburbs, were ghettoized, and the first generation was not so visible. However, because the second, third, and onward generations are now more visible, a kind of fear is emerging. The figures are quite "worrying", because the numbers of Muslims are growing very fast. Although in reality this increased visibility is due to increased integration, exactly the opposite situation is portrayed in the official discourse, which speaks of Muslims as a community far from mainstream society. The parents may have been isolated, but the kids are much more visible in the mainstream spaces, in what we call the public sphere, where many more now attend universities, are part of the job market, and are generally moving out of the social ghettos of yesterday. So they are more visible and yet this new visibility is perceived as a problem.

The second "problem" is immigration. Immigration is perceived as a threat, and yet at the same time, a necessity. Within the next 15 years, we are told that Europe needs to bring in more than 11 million workers. Where are these workers supposed to come from? It was thought that they were to come from Eastern Europe, but this expectation has not been realized. This means that we need immigrants from other places, but Europeans are scared of their numbers. So we have new laws, new security rules that are very tough today, because Muslim presence is perceived as a threat.

The third point, which is once again not to be denied, is terrorism. Terrorism is a reality; it is not going to end. We will have terrorist threats and we have to deal with this, and once again it is security. However, this point links with the two previous points – about visibility and

immigration – in order to generate unfounded mistrust. I was in a TV program in Switzerland, and the leader of the far-right party said, "Look, these Muslims are a problem, because they are everywhere. They are visible everywhere." So, first visibility. Second, immigration, "we have to protect ourselves". Third, terrorism, "we are not safe". So with all these, we are nurturing fears and mistrust, and it is a problem. Out of these fears, what we are witnessing today in the elite intellectual arena is something we talked about this morning in our public session: a reduction of our past.

Towards an Inclusive Future: Recognising Europe's Diverse Heritage

Because people are scared of this presence, what takes place now in the public arena are things like the Pope's statement [on Europe and Islam], and the appearance of books in France and the UK speaking about "the European past". For example, one book found in France is Proud to be French by the well-known French intellectual Max Gallo. He argues that people should not forget that the roots of modern Europe are Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, by which he implies that Muslims in Europe should know that they are not part of the roots of European civilization. In the UK, there is a very important book, The Six Main European Values, the first value being Christianity, not Islam, demonstrating that the perception is that Islam is alien to this value system. So, in fact, because we are scared of the present, we are reducing the past, and in doing so, we end up building a past that is not true, one that goes against all scholarly evidence. The past of Europe is Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and more. And we have to understand this. We have to know how to tackle the plurality of the past in order to build the plurality of the future.

I think that this includes doing something about the curriculum of the public education system. If you look at the curriculum, it is problematic because it is not inclusive, but is in fact exclusive. We still speak about Europe as having a white indigenous reality. It is wrong, and I think that if we are not inclusive in education, it could result in a "struggle of memories." What we need is an objective history of our nations because not dealing with this objectively allows people to struggle for what they think is the best view of our history. We had a very big discussion in the UK and in France, for example, about colonization. It concerned whether or not colonization was good or bad. Some were saying that every part of colonization was bad, but some concluded that since we went on to colonize and especially to civilize, therefore we should show the few good things about it. So we were having this discussion about memories. It is easy to see that if you do not recognize the plurality of memories, the objective history, you will promote a "struggle of memories," which is not good because we are just struggling for our own perception of what is the correct memory, or the correct view of history.

Moving into the Mainstream: The Dangers of Normalising Far-Right Discourse

A third problem that we are witnessing and experiencing now is the normalization of certain forms of discourse. We all understand secularism, and understand that we have to abide by law, but there is a problem with the trends that are now winning in Europe. The danger in Europe now is not the rise of the far-right parties; the problem is the normalization of their discourse. Many other parties now say what only far-right parties said yesterday. Their discourse has reached the general discourse. And what is really confusing is that yesterday Muslims were told by authorities to abide by the law, and to this we agreed. But now the laws have changed; this is the problem. In France, for example, the authorities said that Muslims had to abide by the law of laïcité, which was fine, but then the law was changed. Now we have a similar trend in Switzerland where they too want to change the law. Why? Because it was too

open for Muslims, so they believe they have to change the law to "protect themselves". This is the discussion everywhere about religious freedom and the possibility of respecting it, and these changes in the law are really dangerous. For example, currently in the UK in the name of security the law is changed to be more "protective". Here I want to point out something that is really important. When we look at our laws, a single text could be read in two different ways. If I trust Muslims as citizens, I can read the text in a way that would facilitate their integration within the scope of the text. However, if I do not trust Muslims, I can interpret the text in order to make it possible to isolate them. So the same text could have an integrative reading or an exclusivist reading, and the latter is what we have very often in Europe: a way to read the law so as to "protect" the general "public" from a perceived "threat".

A fourth problem that we are dealing with is the rise of a new racism. Once again, I do not like to use the concept of Islamophobia carelessly. I think it is a tricky concept and we have to be very cautious because some Muslims use it when they are being criticized, or when they see someone criticizing other Muslims. We have to make a distinction. It is right to criticize some Muslim behaviors; it is right to criticize or to ask about some Muslim values. This is part of critical discussion; this should be accepted. This is different from racism, so we have to differentiate between racist statements and critical statements and legitimate questions. In these times of very high sensitivity, this can be unclear to some Muslims. When the foreign minister in the UK asked about the niqab (the veil that covers the face) – a simple question – it was perceived as Islamophobia. We have to make Muslim leaders understand that by labeling such things as Islamophobia, they are nurturing a victim mentality. We can disagree with the minister, but at least let us have a discussion. Not every time we get a question about Islam does it have to be perceived as an attack. This is why I am cautious with this term.

We cannot deny, however, that certain forms of discourse today are nurturing something that is anti-Islamic. We cannot deny that you are targeted because you are a Muslim and only because you are a Muslim. This is a new racism as the monitoring commission in Vienna defines it. This was raised in the discussions this morning. I think that we have old habits coming to the forefront now, which are very dangerous for Europe. You know what we are told, that Muslims have a doubletalk, a double loyalty, and this is the "fifth column". Who said that for whom and when in this continent? We heard this during the '30s and '40s against the Jews. Doubletalk: "you say something, we cannot trust you". Double loyalty: "you are here, but you are there, and you are a fifth column, and there is an international network of people working against us, which is an international conspiracy". We are dealing with the same old things. It is

a new racism with old customs coming back, and I think it is really important.

And the last problem that we are facing is something that is really important for us all to be aware of. It is something I call "Islamizing" problems. We have social problems, we have economic problems, and we have urban problems. They have nothing to do with religion. They have to do with social policies. So when there are second-class schools that have a lot of violence in them, or when there is the problem of unemployment, we are actually dealing with the lack of true integrity in our social policies, which has nothing to do with religion. But when we have politicians who do not have social answers, they tend to essentialize the problem claiming that these social ills stem from the fact that these people are Muslims or Arabs. One example of this is the rioting that occurred in the suburbs of France one year ago. These riots had nothing to do with religion. They were citizens asking for their rights, feeling that they were not treated as equal citizens, but as second-class citizens of the country. Fortunately the great majority of our politicians were not indulging in the claim that the problem was due to the fact that they were Muslims. However, although this was the character of the main discourse, we still heard some intellectuals among them saying, "Oh, do not be misled, the common feature between all these young people is that they are Muslims." What is the point of mentioning that? That has nothing to do with the real problem. So Islamizing the problem when you lack proper social policy is very dangerous. And although we see this coming from the political arena, it can sometimes come from Muslims themselves when they claim that because they are Muslims they are victims of the system. This victim mentality is very dangerous and I think that we have to move away from that way of thinking and begin to ask for real solutions and effective social policies.

Conclusion: Working Together for a New "We"

To conclude I want to go over the things that Muslim citizens and society as a whole must

undertake in order to move towards a better future together in Europe. There are three main points in this conclusion, concerning three general responsibilities. The first is for Muslim communities to nurture a reformist approach to come up with new answers for new challenges, with the understanding that one can do so and still remain faithful to the principles of Islam. There is no way we can move forward without trying to promote new solutions. You know, I am not considered representative of the Muslims, since, for some Muslims, I am too much of a westerner, and for some westerners, I am too much of a Muslim. But I accept that this is part of the game because when you are in-between two worlds, you have to accept that both sides will criticize you. But we should now be able to say as European Muslims, "I will not be a lesser Muslim to be more European, and I should not be a lesser European to be more Muslim. I can be both, but I need to be faithful to the principles of Islam and come up with new answers for the new challenges we are facing today." So, I need to take into account text and context; this dialectical process is an important one.

The key concept for all this, for all of us – including Muslims in Japan – is citizenship. We need to internalize the fact that we have full citizenship, and we should not be obsessed with this minority business. As a citizen, I cannot be put in a minority box because there is no minority citizenship in our countries. One is either a citizen or not. So if I am a citizen, I am part of the majority, a part of the society, and I have to deal with the society by following its rules and making positive contributions. I must reject the categorization of being seen as "only" Muslim, in order to be truly able to say, "I am a citizen."

The last and final point is that we know that all citizens share common values and common ground upon which we can build a better future. I think it is important for Christians, Jews, Muslims and others to come together, understanding and respecting the differences in our values, but using the ethics and values that we share to work together. My proposal for now and for the future is the creation of what I call a new "we." When I say "we" here, I am talking about all the people who have a sense of citizenship, a sense of common values, and who know that we can do things together. But to build this new "we" instead of nurturing the minority mentality, or the perception of "us versus them" is to come to something that is our common citizenship, our common values, and our common future. We need to begin by building this trust at the local level. We are dealing now with a state of fear, and we need to work to dispel fear, and begin the revolution of trust. All of this could be, and is being done at .the local level in our cities in Europe, and I think this will be the future. Thank you