

European Islam – as an Identity Proposal for Modern Man. A Conference Report.

Marek MOROŃ

A seminar was organised at the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the University of Sarajevo on 24.05.2016. The title of the gathering was “European Islam – the Tatar component”. This was the first ever meeting between representatives of the centuries old Muslim communities from Lithuania, Bosnia and Poland. The initiative came from Poland, from the author of this text. The event in Sarajevo was a continuation of activities aimed at promoting knowledge and awareness of European Islam. Besides the strong representation of academicians from Bosnia, papers were presented by Professor Adas Jakubauskas of The Mykolas Romeris University of Vilnius-Lithuania, Professor Selim Chazbijewicz of the Warmia-Mazury University of Olsztyn, Poland and Dr Marek Moroń of the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, Poland.

1 Promoting European Islam from 2005 till 2016

Since 2009 I have organised a number of my own lectures, discussions and meetings in The Silesian Library of Katowice, City Library in Krakow, etc, as well as a seminar at the Jagiellonian University commemorating the 100th anniversary of death of Ismail Bey Gasparinsky, the great Crimean Tatars’ humanist and educationist¹. I invited a delegation from Bosnia (University of Sarajevo) and the “Nakhla” Bosnian Women Organisation for a program of meetings in Krakow and Katowice in 2010. That visit was a follow up to my

¹ Ismail Bey Gasparinski: İsmail Gaspıralı, (20.03.1851 – 11.09.1914) was a [Crimean Tatar](#) intellectual, educator, publisher and politician. He was one of the first [Muslim](#) intellectuals in the [Russian Empire](#), who realised the need for education and cultural reform and modernisation of the Turkic and Islamic communities.

visit to Bosnia in 2010 that took place as a consequence of my acquaintance with the (former) Rais-e-Ulema, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia Mr. Mustafa Cerić.

Otherwise, my contacts and relations with The Crimean Tatars date back to 2005 when I visited Bakhchisarai. That is when I met Mustafa Dzemilev² for the first time and had a number of talks with him. Much later in 2014 during an awards ceremony during which Mr M. Dzemilev received the first “Solidarity Prize”, I presented him with an official invitation to visit the Center for Comparative Studies of Civilizations. In the following year I accepted an invitation to attend the 2nd World Congress of Crimean Tatars in Ankara (Turkey) on 1–2 August 2015.

It may be noted that while there were three individuals (including myself) from Poland at the Congress, there was no official delegation from Poland nor were there any visitors from the Polish Embassy in Ankara. This was in contrast to the significant attendance of diplomats from USA, Germany, Ukraine and, first of all, a strong delegation from the Seymas of Lithuania.³

The above explanation and presentation of the background illustrates my long term approach and strategy to establish a firm differentiation between our European Islam and the barbarism rooted in the nomadic traditions of the Middle Eastern deserts and the ideology which was conceived in those places in the 18th century and which is fundamentally alien to whatever we stand for in Europe.

2 European Islam as an Identity Proposal for Modern Man.

European Islam as I understand and promote it, refers to Muslim communities in Europe who have lived on our continent for centuries and have developed their own cultural characteristics and loyalty towards their respective countries without compromising adherence to their faith. Thus, this term as used by me, does not refer to individual Muslims or communities who have decided to come and reside in Europe in recent decades, bringing and

² Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev, [Crimean Tatar](#), born 13 November 1943, is former Chairman of the [Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People](#) and a member of the [Ukrainian Parliament](#) since 1998. He is the recognized leader of the Crimean Tatar National Movement and a former [Soviet dissident](#).

³ M. Moroń, *Pomoc Tatarom Krymskim jest naszą moralną powinnością*, “Przegląd tatarski”, 2015:4, s. 2–4.



sustaining their own loyalties and traditional exotic way of life, alien to what we understand as European culture.

Islam today is facing unprecedented dilemmas and dangers. These dangers were conceived in the 18th century from the nomadic cultures in regions of Middle East. These dangers have now developed into a murderous ideology attempting to discredit and destroy Islam as enlightenment and guidance for mankind.

How can anyone from the 21st century identify him or herself as a modern European Muslim? The precise answer could be: by standing on the essential pillars of its faith and on the principles of citizenship of a society built on freedom and knowledge.

In 1954 Justice Muhammad Munir wrote in Pakistan in his report and I quote: “[...] Musalman of today lives in the past and yearns for the return of the glory that was Islam. He finds himself standing on the crossroads wrapped in the mantle of the past and with the dead weight of the centuries on his back frustrated bewildered and hesitant to turn to one corner or the other. The freshness and simplicity of his faith which gave determination to his mind and spring to his muscle is now denied to him. He has neither the means to conquer and there are no countries to conquer. Little does he understand that the forces that are pitted against him are entirely different from those against which early Islam had to fight and that on the clues given by his ancestors human mind has achieved results which he cannot understand. He therefore finds himself in the state of helplessness waiting for someone to help him. [...] Nothing but a bold reorientation of Islam to separate the vital from the lifeless can preserve it a world idea.”⁴

In 2004 Mobashar Javad Akbar wrote a foreword to the book of the late Rafique Zakaria. Akbar quotes from the poetry of Mohammad Iqbal where a believer asks God: “Why have you forsaken your faithful?”, and M. J. Akbar says: “The question throbs with a number of overlapping realities: low self-esteem in the age of defeat, loss of both political and economic power, bewilderment, an inability to discover the intellectual dialectic or scientific illumination for resurgence, the humiliation of descent from invincibility to impotence”.⁵ Any religious identity does not automatically feature a political

⁴ Muhammad Munir, *The 1954 Justice Munir Commission Report On The Anti Ahmadi Riots Of Punjab In 1953*, Lahore 1954, p. 232. Available [online](#) (16.06.2016).

⁵ Zakaria, Rafique, *Indian Muslims; Where Have They Gone Wrong?*, Foreword by M. J. Akbar, Mumbai Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2004, p. XXI.



characteristic. Yet any religious identity when painted with political colours and emotions may be a useful instrument in pursuing political objectives by parties and political elites.

When I say European Islam, I do not mean to say that there are many Islams and one of them is European. European Islam refers in its adjective to the culture, tradition and attitude towards one's own community. European Islam stands firmly on the essence of faith. One is tempted to say that European Muslims are indeed fundamentalists as they adhere to the fundamentals of faith and at the same time consider it to provide guidance through the changing times. For example, I have in my library a book called "Travel guide to Galicia" published in 1905. Galicia was a region in the south of Poland, presently Slovakia, part of Ukraine and Hungary. Using this guide book today, even 110 years after its publication, I can easily reach any mountain in the region. Of course the description of the travel route differs. Where in 1905 the book says that there is a forest, I no longer see forest but some small bush and new houses built. Where it points out an inn is on the left bank of the river, I see now a hotel with a metal plate saying that there was a small inn a century ago, etc. These difference do not mean to me the necessity to destroy houses and plant trees because a forest was there earlier or to demolish a hotel because earlier there was small tavern. The general line of guidance leads me to the peak of the mountain as it would have in 1905. Islam, which opened the hearts of the greatest poets and mystics of mankind, which brings men closer towards God is being taken over by brutal primitive, intolerant forces conceived in the 18th century in remote locations of the Middle East. Fareed Zakaria writes on the 14 of April 2016: "In the 1950s, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi version of Islam, a product of nomadic desert culture, was practiced by a tiny minority of Muslims – perhaps 1 to 2 percent. Then came the oil boom, and Saudi Arabia – flush with cash – spread these ideas throughout the Muslim world."⁶

Islam continued to be a source of strength and of religious identity for the Muslims who settled in central Europe some 600 years ago in the territories of Lithuania, Poland, present Belarus and Ukraine (the Tatars). They became Europeans centuries ago, lived ever since alongside their neighbours of other creeds, fought for the freedom and prosperity of their country and are the co-creators of Europe as it is in the 21st century. The same goes for the Bosnian people of the Balkans. I recall my first meeting with the former Mufti

⁶ Zakaria Fareed, *Saudi Arabia: The Devil We Know*, Available [online](#), (16.06.2016).



of Bosnia, Mustafa Cerić, in Poland in Gniezno in 2002. In a panel including representatives of other ethnic groups, some Jewish colleagues said that now they are only ghosts in Europe. Mufti Cerić said: “But we European Muslims we are not ghosts – we are hosts in Europe.” In other words, we European Muslims have been here for hundreds of years; whether in Bosnia, Lithuania, Turkey or Poland, Crimea or Belarus. Together with our Christian and Jewish brothers and sisters we were and we are Europeans. It is only by our exemplary life as good Muslims and good citizens of our countries and good neighbours that the European Muslims could possibly influence everyone.

This is the possible format of identity for modern man in Europe. European Muslims are not guests who came from distant lands to have a better life in Europe and to express mere contempt for the European way of life. Conscious identity suggests a state of personality arrived at in the process of choice or as an affirmation, following comparison of the concept to which one was born into, with alternatives. It may be hard for an individual to experience mobility in terms of evaluating identities as these are long processes and occur when consciously acknowledged or perhaps happen by accident. A person’s religious or spiritual identity may be the result of the continued search of an individual or a group for religious identity. But as Michael Amaladoss, SJ says: “Some people of the metacosmic level feel challenged by various circumstances and problems of life to continue to search for meaning [...]. People may be at various levels of spiritual development. A group of followers may follow the leadership of a guru or a pioneer. But the search itself has an individual character”⁷.

The concept of referring to God as a public affirmation of faith and identifying oneself or a group, is rejected. In its place we see an insistence on the individualisation and privatisation of faith. In other words, the irrelevance of God is implicated when approaching moral dilemmas, the concepts of values and choices for the future of societies and states. If we link this with the unquestioned decline of church affiliation among people in most of Europe, we may say that we are witnessing the creation of a potential and a vacuum for spiritual formulas that may guide men and women while facing the challenges of the present and the future. That potential and demand will not be filled by any *jahiliya* of atheism. Nor will that space be filled by the murderous ideology that crawled out of exotic nomadic traditions and is nowadays emerging as the mortal enemy of Islam.

⁷ Amaladoss SJ, Michael *Religious Identity and Mobility*, “Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection”, volume 64 no. 5, Chennai 2000, p. 2.



The potential for creating identities is characteristic for universal concepts that do not bend or break when encountering different cultures and traditions.

The potential for new identities exists within spiritual volumes, which clearly differentiates their essence and universal message from secondary traditions, rituals, man-made dogmas and superstition. It is possible to visualise the functioning of such an essence in different cultural environments growing out of different historical and, in fact, civilisational backgrounds. The direction of religious or spiritual evolution is towards making the relations between God and man simple and direct. In the very first lines of the *Quran* there is a plea to God to “show us the straight path”⁸. And Islam is said to be the straight path. This essence should be pursued regardless of secondary cultural and ethnic connotations. They sometimes make irrelevant, exotic and aggressive characteristics appear as to be essential attributes of the universal message, which they are not. To this aim, all the exotics, cultural and linguistic identities associated with Islam for geographical reasons should be firmly set aside as being secondary if not irrelevant. The potential new identities will develop out of the volume of Islam and will function in the societies of multiple identities only. To be a European Muslim means to live the essence of Islam and the values of Europe: freedom of creed, speech, equality of women, state of law, civil rights, etc. Islam is not equivalent to Arabic culture. Arabs are a minority in the Muslim world community. So is their culture. The Islamic way of life is to conduct oneself in accordance with the essential indications of Islam and not to change the European way of life into an Arabic way of life. The mosaic of faiths and personal religious identities is not a static structure. The mobility of societies and individuals in the present world contributes to the growing possibilities of comparisons of ideas and concepts of relations between God and man. The possibilities of emerging of new identities exist in the attraction of the essential concepts of faiths and not in the marketing of colourful rituals which lack simplicity and, since they are being interesting and even in fact pleasant, they claim at the same time to be the guardians of secrets and truth allegedly covered behind the complex procedures, rituals and complicated external attributes of ritualism. The truth is simple and Islam is not exotic.

To conclude, I would like to quote from the book of Adnan Silajdzic *Muslims in search of an identity*: “One may conclude that others are as ne-

⁸ The Holy *Quran*, Surah No. 1, *The meaning of The Glorious Koran*, Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall, New American Library.



cessary to us in the new Europe to come as we are ourselves if we are to realize our essence. If everyone was the same and thought in the same way there would be no need for human kind; it would be enough to have a single person in the world for this in itself would demonstrate that God is omnipotent and may create anything even a being that is in some sense His image. Difference including religious difference are a God given state of humanity and we must respect it. What remains to us therefore is to get to know one another and to strive to understand each other as best we may in all our spiritual and cultural distinctiveness. It is only from this perspective that we can hope for a better future for the Old World.”⁹

3 What is the future of European Islam?

The European Muslims do not have sufficient interaction among themselves. We should visit each other more often. And we should also try to make our voice be heard in our countries as well as in Brussels and in Ankara. There is a spaceroom for a loud voice of advocating the development of new concept of identities from the faith of Islam while embracing its essence and the human progress which has taken place over the centuries also as a result of the light of Islam and which is largely synonymous with being European. I propose to continue promoting European Islam as the identity for modern man for the 21st century.

The voice of European Islam is not heard in Europe. The European Muslims do not draw the attention of media or politicians because they simply live their normal life. They do not need to integrate because they are Europeans. They never caused troubles or posed dangers so they never came to the attention of any European forum. Islam in Europe is identified with people coming from the Middle East, with the descendants of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa who were born in Europe but for various reasons decided that they don't want to be Europeans and would rather place their loyalty with a murderous ideology coming from the deserts and hailing its beginning from its origin rooted in the 18th century.¹⁰ The words

⁹ Silajdzic Adnan, *Muslims in Search of an Identity*, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sarajevo, Al-Kalem Publishing Center, Sarajevo 2007, p. 106.

¹⁰ Wahhabism is a [religious movement](#) or branch of [Sunni Islam](#). It has been variously described as “ultraconservative” and fundamentalist. Wahhabism is named after an eighteenth-century preacher and scholar, [Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab](#) (1703–1792). He started a



“Allahu Akbar” in Europe do not bring the connotation of the human heart and mind glorifying God – which is their intention – but have become associated with murders and criminals shouting and desanctifying these words, which are holy for every Muslim. European Islam is quiet and “ordinary” and so nobody pays attention to it. We are going to continue to have Islam in Europe but it should be our, centuries-old Islam. The countries of Central Europe and the Balkans are the homelands to many of these European Islam communities. This includes Poland. This should be promoted and the voice of old European Islam communities must be established and heard.

The process of promoting knowledge about European Islam provides an avenue for envisaging a new identity for modern man on our continent. It is a European Muslim. There is no question of any kind of assimilation and adjusting to European culture and traditions because the European Muslims have themselves been part of that heritage for centuries. While being European as well as aspiring to modernity, the European Muslim does not abandon his or her faith in God and considers His revealed guidance as the way to live and by his/her life thereby provide an example to all around. The European Muslim identity may not be such a popular concept presently but it has a potential that may show the avenue for the continuation of Europe as we know it.

Note about the author

Marek MOROŃ PhD from the Jagiellonian University, lecturer at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University. During the years 2001-2007 Consul General of Poland in Mumbai. He worked earlier in Polish diplomatic missions to Tehran (1981–1986) and Kolkata (1988–1992). He also lived in Bangladesh, Bahrain and Egypt. Visiting lecturer at the Warsaw University, and K.R. Cama Oriental Institute. He has written a number of papers on nationalism in South Asia. The author of the books *Sources of Bengali and Bangladeshi Nationalism* published in 2013 in Krakow and *Visit of Subhas Chandra Bose to Poland in July 1933* published in 2015 in Kolkata. Member of the Joint Council of Polish Catholics and Muslims.

E-MAIL: marekpl99@hotmail.com

[revivalist movement](#) in the remote, sparsely populated region of [Najd](#). Wahhabism has been accused of being “a source of global terrorism”.

