

Martin Kettle on Europe's Islamic outsiders

Whose Common Home?

From Connemara in the west to the Caucasus in the east, we are all Europeans now. Well, almost. Just before we lie back contentedly in our nice warm Euro-integrationist bath, let's ask a tricky question. Where do the Muslims fit into this?

Europe's Muslim agenda falls into two parts. The first consists of the challenges posed by the settlement of substantial minorities of Muslims in many European countries. Europe's Muslims aren't the only ethnic or religious minority to seem more than a touch marginalised by the common European homeland mood that is currently sweeping the continent. But they are probably the most numerous, certainly the most geographically widespread and likely to be the most openly resistant to the resurgent Eurocentrism of the Old World at the start of the 1990s.

Hardly a week goes by in these remarkable times without fresh evidence that every European society - and European society as a whole - has a problem adjusting to Islam. In Britain this month, the first anniversary of the Rushdie affair is a reminder of one particular manifestation of the apparent irreconcilability of Islamic fundamentalism and secular liberal humanism. The huge international resonance of the Rushdie affair is unusual. But it is hardly an isolated example of the way that Islam can pose a basic conflict of values in multi-cultural society.

France, for example, has been convulsed recently by the question of whether two Muslim schoolgirls in Creil near Paris should be allowed to wear headscarves in class. That issue is seen by many on the Left as a direct challenge to France's long tradition of secular state education, a defining element in French socialism. But it is also being used by racists to revive the immigration debate in French politics. And it raises vexing questions for feminists, who have been split over whether it is more important to respect religious culture (the view taken by Daniele Mitterrand) or to oppose the oppression of

Muslim women (the view of prominent feminist Elisabeth Badinter).

The significant thing about such arguments is that they are representative. They could flare up in almost any European nation with a Muslim minority. Whether they are reconcilable is unclear, though the evidence is hardly encouraging. Yet they certainly go to the heart of any attempt to define a European identity.

This brings us to the necessarily more speculative second part of Europe's Muslim agenda. A changing Europe has to recognise that its relations with those Islamic nations on its periphery which supply much of the continent's cheap labour, are changing rapidly too. The implications are immense.

In the first few weeks of 1990, it is already clear that liberalisation in the Soviet Union has released immensely strong Islamic nationalist forces in the south, just as it had already released powerful Christian nationalisms in the west.

The Azerbaijani Muslims shouting and waving on the banks of the River Araks in January, or tearing down border fences to join up with relatives on the Iranian side, provided only one among many disparate displays of nationalist feeling in the

USSR in recent months. But the violence and direct identification with an Islamic fundamentalist revolution which most inhabitants of Europe regard as totally alien, mark the Azeri Shi'ite movement as altogether different from nationalist movements elsewhere in the USSR so far.

In the centre of Europe, the year began not only with the overthrow of the hated Ceausescu regime in Romania. It was also marked by the extraordinary revival of one of the most significant historical issues in the Balkans - long forgotten by the West - the perceived threat to Balkan Slav nationalities from Muslim Turkey.

Two events have focused the growing importance of this problem: first, the anti-Islamic protests in Bulgaria during December and January, and second, the apparently deepening crisis in Turkish society between fundamentalist and Westernised Muslims. The two developments are, of course, closely connected, and each is highly sensitive to the impact of any Islamic revival in the Soviet Union.

The implications in turn for Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania are considerable. It seems incredible that in 1990 we should again be talking about an updated version of the 19th-century 'Eastern

Question'. But that, essentially, is what is happening.

All of this stirs powerful historical memories. Europeans have been brought up to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the spread of the Enlightenment was only possible because the Turks were forced back from the gates of Vienna 300 years ago. And our sense, however misplaced, of the epochal struggle between Catholicism and Islam in Western Europe, is that its outcome was a precondition for European expansion and cultural flowering.

Today of course, it seems ridiculous to talk of a Muslim military threat to any European nation-state. Yet tell

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that to a Cypriot, a Greek or a Bulgarian, and it doesn't seem quite so preposterous. And don't underestimate, either, the extent to which Western European defence thinking, a culture which is now badly in need of a new enemy, may be planning to reorient itself against a perceived threat from Islamic powers such as Iran, Libya and even Pakistan.

All of this points to the pivotal importance of Turkey in the emerging new Europe. It is fashionable to deny that Turkey is European and the political decision last year to delay the Turks' application for EC membership until the late 1990s reflected more general European unease. But the collapse of Eastern European state socialism and the pressures on the integrity of the Soviet Union mean the Turkish question is moving back up the agenda.

So there is a respectable case for saying that Islam, in various related guises, could become the most important socio-cultural problem facing Europe as a whole over the coming years. It at least bears thinking about in such terms. The original question was where the Muslims fit into the vaunted European vision. The answer is that at present they don't.

