Cultures in Conflict

On Muslim immigrants in Europe

by PAUL M. BARRETT

In 1996, Weatherhead University Professor Samuel P. Huntington published a provocative and influential book called *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington, who died last December at the age of 81, argued that with the conclusion of the Cold War, conflicts worldwide would tend toward the cultural rather than ideological. In particular, he warned policymakers to prepare for friction and possible war between Western culture and its antagonists in the East: Chinese culture and Islamic culture. After 9/11, Huntington's controversial analysis provided an intellectual framework for many in the United States and Europe who viewed Muslims with heightened suspicion. Critics questioned the *Clash of Civilizations* as simplistic and said it justified illegitimate Western aggression against predominantly Muslim nations, especially in the Middle East.

Christopher Caldwell '83 adopts Huntington's thesis and applies it vigorously to the stormy drama of Muslim immigration to Western Europe. A prolific contributor to the *Weekly Standard*, the *Financial Times*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, Caldwell (my Harvard College classmate) shares Huntington's preference for broad generalization and damn-the-torpedo argument. Subtle he ain't.

He colorfully describes a sagging, secular Europe, ashamed of its heritage and inhibited by a reflexive “political correctness” that dictates extreme cultural relativism. Bullying and reshaping this doddering Western civilization, Caldwell contends, is Islam, which—in the person of millions of fertile, devout migrants from Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, and elsewhere—has launched what amounts to a gradual invasion. Muslims, in his telling, are turning London into a version of Islamabad, Paris into Algiers, and Berlin into Istanbul.

"European countries are shrinking, aging, and short of workers," Caldwell writes. "Their only obvious supply of rejuvenation and labor is in the Muslim cultures to the south and southeast, which have historically been either Europe’s enemies, its overlords, or its underlings. Europe is wagering that attitudes handed down over the centuries, on both sides, have disappeared, or can be made to disappear. That is probably not a wise wager."

Forget about assimilation, he admonishes. "Immigration is not enhancing or validating European culture; it is supplanting it." This he sees as a looming disaster, at least for Europeans.

Caldwell has company in his dire predictions. Bernard Lewis, Princeton's eminent Islamic scholar, has said that by the end of the twenty-first century, "Europe will be part of the Arabic west, of the Maghreb." And the numbers are impressive: 20 million Muslims on the continent, if you count the native Muslims of the Balkans. Five million Muslims reside in France, 4 million in Germany, 2 million in Britain. A million Muslims live in London alone, making up an eighth of the city's population. Large concentrations vie for serious political and social influence in Amsterdam, the suburbs of Paris, and certain neighborhoods of Berlin.

The United States has an immigrant Muslim population of several million, though the precise figure is disputed. (Unlike European countries, the U.S. Census doesn't do official headcounts by religion.) What's not contested is that in percentage terms, American Muslims are a much more modest presence than their co-religionists in Britain, France, Germany, or Holland. As Caldwell explains, Europe's Muslims tend to be poorer, less educated, and less integrated into their host societies. The fundamentalist strain of Islam given to hostile preaching about debauched unbelievers condemned to hellfire (not to mention international Jewish conspiracies) plays a far more prominent role in Muslim communities in Europe than in it does in America.

Terrorism in the name of Islam has been more common in Europe than in the United States, in terms of both consummated acts of violence and nefarious planning. The 9/11 plotters mapped their airborne assault from apartments in Hamburg, Germany. In several instances, bloody violence in Europe has involved second-generation Muslims lashing out at the countries where they were born.
and raised; the United States has not seen that phenomenon.

Caldwell pays insufficient attention to the variations in ideology among European Muslims, including the secularism of some immigrants who have struggled into the middle class. But he does explain deftly why the European and American stories are so different. After World War II, Europe recruited unskilled labor from predominantly Muslim nations to rebuild war-damaged cities and industries. The host societies lazily and chauvinistically assumed that the imported workers would return to their homelands after a time. Instead, the Muslims settled into ethnic enclaves and brought their relatives. Why not? Europe’s generous welfare systems meant that even when jobs became scarcer, Muslim immigrants could subsist far better in London or Amsterdam than back where they came from.

The faces haunt one—eyes gazing back at the lens with a resignation so profound as to have passed beyond caring. These are unusual photographic portraits in which “the sitter has no interest in the photo, and the photographer has no interest in the photo,” says Bruce Jackson. “Yet these pictures show someone in a very vulnerable situation.” That situation is one of incarceration at Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas; the portraits are ID photos taken of (and by) inmates between 1915 and 1940. Sixty-two of the pictures are of prisoners from the Cummins women’s unit. With digital technology, Jackson has restored the images and published 121 of them in a new book, Pictures from a Drawer: Prison and the Art of Portraiture (Temple University Press).

A well-known photographer, documentary filmmaker, and ethnographer, Jackson was a junior fellow at Harvard from 1963 to 1967, and is now SUNY Distinguished Professor and Capen professor of American culture at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. One thing that makes these prison portraits striking, he explains, is that they violate certain conventions of “how we take photos and how we allow photos of ourselves to be taken. Most of us have a ‘photo face’—women will show their teeth, men will stand up straighter. These pictures have a naturalness to them that is very difficult to acquire.”

Jackson acquired the pictures themselves quite easily. In 1962, he began an extensive body of work on prison as a cultural site, done primarily in Texas and Arkansas, that continued until 1979 and yielded several books, numerous articles, two documentary films, plus phonograph albums and CDs. He researched African-American work songs in Texas prisons, where the commissioner allowed him full access. Later he got similar support in Arkansas, where the prison system had become so dysfunctional that a federal judge declared incarceration there unconstitutional, because it represented cruel and unusual punishment.

In 1975, Jackson was at the Cummins Prison Farm on the last of his eight visits when an inmate who took identification photos motioned him into the room where he worked. The prisoner opened a drawer containing hundreds of loose prisoner ID pictures. “Help yourself,” he said. Jackson did as he was told, stuffing photographs into his jacket pocket and, as he says, “stole” 178 small prints from decades past.

The photographs all had patinas that often obscured the image. “Yellow, and not the charming yellow old photos get,” Jackson reports. He had to wait three decades until sufficiently advanced digital technology (specifically, the CS2 and CS3 versions of Photoshop) allowed him to restore the images to viewable condition. “Now, I can say: here’s this particular color band—let’s take it down,” he explains. But he did not remove scratches, fold marks, and deteriorations in an attempt to make the pictures look new. “These photos themselves are objects in time,” he explains. “Sometimes they are stained or ripped. The book shows both the prisoner’s face and the life the piece of paper itself has had.”

It is safe to say that the inmate photographers had no ego investment in their images, but the photographic documents they produced nevertheless have a lasting power. “Perhaps they didn’t know how to put a filter on a lens, or change the aperture for a sunny or cloudy day,” Jackson says, “but they knew how to make a picture in that room.”

~~CRAIG LAMBERT~~
Montage

terms and over time blended into the larger, predominantly Protestant, population. Without Europe’s social safety net, American Muslims had to work hard to get ahead—and they did. The fallout from 9/11 disrupted this classic American immigration narrative, but thankfully hasn’t changed its course in a permanent way.

Even as he draws the U.S.-European comparison, however, Caldwell indulges in a crude rendering of the clash of civilizations idea. In the process, he reveals his weakness as a social critic. Without sufficient evidence, he suggests that Muslims across the board are a malign force, inherently hostile to the West and incapable of adapting their cultures to those of their host countries. In the case of the United States, Caldwell declares: “The real story of American Muslims is one of accelerating alienation from the mainstream of U.S. life, with Muslims in this country choosing their Islamic identity over their American one.” He cites as support for that conclusion the impression of one notably pessimistic journalist, Geneive Abdo. She blames Western prejudice, a distinction Caldwell glosses over. He similarly ignores a wealth of recent scholarship and polling data that suggest a less gloomy outlook. (Full disclosure: Caldwell also ignores journalism to the contrary, including some committed by your reviewer, so discount—or credit—my view as you see fit.)

Caldwell buttresses his contention that Muslims are a pervasively intimidating presence in Europe by implying that cultural tension leads inexorably to violence. To demonstrate Muslim immigrants’ “dual loyalty,” he repeatedly points to avowed extremists and terrorists, as if their views and actions are typical. He tosses out pejorative labels—Islam is an “adversary culture” and a “blame culture”—with barely any basis. And at times he engages in mischievous logic: noting that Muslim terrorists in the West tend to share a sense of “displacement,” he concludes that “migration, in fact, has a lot to do with terrorism.” But that doesn’t make sense. That some Muslim terrorists in Europe are migrants doesn’t prove that most, or even many, migrants are would-be terrorists.

Europe without a doubt has a Muslim “problem.” In some cities, cultures are in conflict, and the threat of violence hangs in the air. Caldwell correctly calls attention to the origins of this tension, and he offers a chilling preview of where it could lead if moderate-minded leaders do not intervene. But he undercuts his alarm by relying on dubious rhetoric and faulty proof.


Chapter & Verse
Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Whitefoord Cole requests the name of the author and full text of the fragment “Would that I may awake from my wine-sleep, that I may begin again.”

Jonathan Bartel is still seeking Hubert Humphreys’s exact description of the vice presidency, circa late 1964 or early 1965: something to the effect of, “I now join the ranks of Hannibal Hamlin, Schuyler Colfax, Levi Morton, and Garrett Hobart….”

Karen Walton still hopes to learn why, when patients die despite the fact that their lab tests and vital signs are normal, it is said they died “in Harvard balance.” She wishes to learn the origin of the phrase.

“at the Harvard Coop” (May-June). Jonathan Bartel was the first reader to identify this snappy number (full title at right), performed by soloist and first piano Christopher B. Cerf and the Lampoon chorus, with guitarist Gordie Main and the Mainiacs, on a 1961 Vanitas Records (V-440) album, The Harvard Lampoon Tabernacle Choir Sings at Leningrad Stadium.

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