

Is the West “diverse”?

Written by Sener Akturk

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SENER AKTURK, APR 21 2010

Is the West “diverse”? Religious diversity in Europe, United States, and the rest of the world

Is the “West” more diverse than the “rest”? In particular, are the traditionally Western Christian countries in Europe and the United States more religiously diverse than the rest of the world? Especially here in the United States, and especially in American academia, we often hear that the U.S. is a particularly diverse country when it comes to religious affiliation. Many Europeans seem to have developed a similar view of their societies, based on what they perceive to be “too much” diversity and multiculturalism. Especially the American view of diversity is based on classifying intra-religious differences within Christianity as “diversity.” Once we group all Christian sects and denominations together as “Christians”, the U.S. is hardly a religiously diverse society, where apart from small percentages of Jews (2%), Muslims (2%), and Buddhists (1%), about 94%-95% of society either adheres to one form of Christianity, or is a non-religious person of Christian descent. A Christian-majority country where non-Christian religions make up, at most, 5% of the population can hardly be called religiously “diverse.”

Yet both pundits and academics continue to make this claim, arguing that the existence of Catholics, Mormons, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and many other Christian denominations signal diversity. I do agree that the U.S. is more diverse in terms of its intra-Christian diversity than most Catholic countries in the world, for example Poland. However, when we compare the U.S. to countries that are somewhat comparable to it in terms of their population, we get a completely different picture. India surpasses the U.S. in its population. India, a Hindu-majority country, is 13% Muslim, 5% Christian, and 1% Sikh. Can you imagine how the socio-religious landscape would look like if the U.S. was 13% Muslim and 5% Hindu? Indonesia is the 4th most populous country in the world, and the most populous Muslim country in the world, still far less populous than the U.S., and compressed in a far smaller territory. Although it is Muslim-majority, it has a 9% Christian minority (6% Protestant, 3% Catholic), and 2% Hindu. Can you imagine the U.S. being 9% Muslim (6% Sunni, 3% Shiite)? Even Russia is 10-15% Muslim, at least 1% Buddhist, and until late 20th century, it was 1%-2% Jewish, with a dazzling array of Christian denominations. Even Syria, the relatively small Muslim country in the Middle East, is 10% Christian. In sum, the U.S. does not seem particularly religiously diverse in comparative perspective, especially when compared to non-Christian countries. Apart from France, which is about 8% Muslim and 1% Jewish, non-Christian religions do not exceed 5% in any Catholic or Protestant European country, which makes them at least as homogenous as the U.S., if not even more. You can check the publicly available numbers in CIA Factbook if you would like; I will not go over the numbers for every country. In rest of this very short piece, I will focus on expressions of religious diversity as manifest in multi-religious architecture.

Comparison is the basis of social sciences and the foundation of a fair and dispassionate discussion, especially if the topic is as heated as religion and politics. A fair comparison is the basis of a fair discussion, whether on current policy or historical practice. An evenhanded tourist traveling through Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Lebanon, Egypt, Senegal, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia would observe this much about religious diversity: While in those Catholic and Protestant countries, once upon a time designated as the (Western) “Christendom,” stretching from Portugal and France to Lithuania and Hungary, overlapping more or less with the borders of present-day EU, our hypothetical tourist is not going to find a single historic “Muslim quarter” or even a historic mosque older than a century, even in those lands that have been ruled by Muslims for centuries. Our tourist will find some new ghetto-like

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Muslim neighborhoods where, mostly, the descendants of Muslim workers called upon to rebuild Europe after World War II live. In stark contrast, in predominately Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and some Eastern Orthodox Christian countries, our hypothetical tourist will find churches, mosques, and temples of other religions as well as sizable adherents of many religions coexisting for centuries, if not millennia. This is the big picture. Again, to be fair in our comparison, there are some exceptions to this generalization on the Muslim side, such as Turkey and Algeria, which resemble average European countries in their religious homogeneity. And through the wars and violence in places like Iraq and Pakistan, religious diversity in those Muslim countries is unfortunately being eroded at present. But despite exceptions, until the 1960s the religious market in Madrid and Palermo, Budapest and Athens has been “monopolized” by one religion only, Christianity, and our tourist will look in vain if s/he is seeking historical communities of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or other non-Christian denominations. This picture is in stark contrast to the dazzling religious diversity of Egypt, Syria, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Albania, Kyrgyzstan, or even Russia. Given the historical background of a Western Christian monopoly in the religious market, it is somewhat understandable that when Muslims, the first significant group of non-Christians, appeared in post-Holocaust Europe, they have increasingly faced nativist and Islamophobic reactions from the older residents, exemplified in the stunning Swiss referendum banning the construction of mosque minarets.

Western European and even some Balkan countries have been historically intolerant of mosques, minarets and other symbolic forms of Islamic culture. While living in Central Europe, I was shocked not to find a single historic mosque in Budapest, Hungary, which was ruled by the Muslim Ottoman Empire for more than 150 years. Athens, which lived until early 19th century under Muslim rule for a total of 375 years, did not have a mosque until 2006, although it is home to an estimated 200,000 Muslims. The same is still true of more than one capital city among EU member states. Although Switzerland is the only country to have a constitutional amendment against the building of minarets, many other European countries “combat” the “minaret threat” by denying permission for the building of mosques, let alone minarets. Unlike Switzerland, which at least has mosques and four of them with minarets, Slovenia still does not have a single mosque, despite the demands by its Muslim minority (2.4 percent of the population) since 1969.

Germany is the EU member state with the largest population, boasting a Muslim minority estimated at 3 to 4 million people. However, its capital city, Berlin, only had a single mosque with a clearly visible minaret, located on the outskirts of the city next to an airport, in 2007 when I briefly lived in Berlin. While the shining golden cupola of the New Synagogue in central Berlin adorns the Berlin skyline with its sole dome, an Islamic dome and minaret are conspicuous for their absence, despite the presence of a much larger Muslim minority. Right-wing mobilization against the building of a mosque with a minaret in Cologne fortunately failed to prevent the approval of a construction permit for the mosque there. Luckily, the German Constitution bans popular plebiscites and referenda, a legacy of de-Nazification, since Hitler abused plebiscites and referenda in pursuit of his anti-Semitic, totalitarian and expansionist agenda. Subjecting minority rights and religious freedoms to a popular referendum, though it has the veneer of democracy, is deeply illiberal and against the spirit of representative democracy.

In contrast, Europe’s eastern and southern neighbors, Russia and the Muslim countries of the Near East, provide many examples of churches and mosques standing side by side. Certainly not more democratic or liberal than Western Europe, Russia and the Muslim countries of the Middle East have more religiously diverse populations and architectural representations of such diversity. A bewildering variety of Christian denominations and their churches adorn the Syrian landscape, and I was pleasantly surprised to find churches along with synagogues and mosques in Moscow and elsewhere in present-day Russia, despite the pervasive anti-Semitism and Islamophobia found in that country. A comparison with the vanished mosques and minarets of Hungary, Greece, Spain, Sicily, Romania, Serbia and elsewhere in Europe is inescapable. Much like the deliberately erased traces of a Jewish civilization in many parts of Europe, traces of an Islamic civilization has also been deliberately erased. A tourist traveling through Europe might not even realize that Muslims lived, ruled, and built their civilization for centuries in present-day Spain, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, and elsewhere in Europe.

Most European countries today seem far from confronting their Islamic past, and very hesitant to embrace their present-day Muslim minorities. However, religious pluralism broadly defined, including confronting and embracing Europe’s suppressed Islamic history and Muslim heritage, along with accommodating present-day Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and others, is a sine qua non of a democratic multiculturalism, one which we must strive for in Europe and

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elsewhere around the world. While these multiculturalist hopes are far from being realized today, at the expense of being deliberately provocative, I suggest that the European and American scholars and publicists should at the very least refrain from calling their countries “religiously diverse,” when in fact they really are not.

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