Islam Misconceived: Russian and Western Perspectives Examined

A two-day, two-city forum, "Islam, Russia, and the West," dealing with the religious and cultural differences underlying the current conflicts along the Islamic-Christian frontier in Eurasia and Europe, was sponsored by Indiana University’s Russian & East European Institute on April 6 and 7. The first day’s meeting took place on the Bloomington campus and featured one panel on Eurasia and one on Europe.

Starting with Eurasia, Devin DeWeese (Central Eurasian Studies, REEl) demolished the journalistic stereotype of Islam as monolithic and primarily ideological, explaining that Islam is more orthopraxy than orthodoxy. The key issue for Muslims is membership in a salvation community; even if practice does not always meet standards, the mere fact of membership can bring salvation. During the period of Soviet domination, many lapses in practice occurred, but the sense of identity and affiliation with the larger Muslim community persisted and remains a defining element for the Muslim peoples in Central Asia.

Nazif Shahrani (Anthropology, REEl) took on the currently popular ideas of Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington about the clash of civilizations. Shahrani views Huntington’s facile formulations as one more example of the Islamophobia of the West. Where is the supposedly terrible Islamic fundamentalism? Shahrani asked. A pope of Polish extraction had more to do with the fall of the USSR than all the Muslims of Central Asia, who are largely apolitical. They are building mosques, learning about Islam, publishing basic texts that have not been available for a long time. The danger, Shahrani argued, is that the current policy of Russia and the West—including the United States—to support authoritarian secular regimes in Central Asia that suppress the free exercise of religion could eventually lead to an extremist reaction from the Muslim community.

Alma Sultangalieva (visiting Fulbright scholar in Central Eurasian Studies) likewise attacked the idea of a monolithic Muslim community. She noted the importance of Islam in articulating a wide variety of ethnic identities. In this regard, she mentioned differences between north and south Kazakhstan and the importance to Tatars, Uzbeks, and others of having their own ethnic mosques. In addressing the situation in the current hot spots of the region, Chechenia and Tajikistan, Sultangalieva underlined that the conflicts taking place there are not so much religious as intra-regional, ethnic, and national in nature. That these conflicts are not religious is attested to by the fact that there was no response to them from other Muslims of the former USSR.

The second panel addressed Islam in Europe, beginning with the Balkans. Francine Friedman (Political Science, Ball State University) again cited Islamophobia as a key issue. She argued that anti-Bosnian spokespersons dredged up the fear of Islamic "fundamentalism" to justify ethnic cleansing, although Bosnian Muslims have long been merely cultural Muslims, very tolerant in their practices and pragmatic in international affairs. But, Friedman noted, the war has changed this: because they were being murdered for their religion, Bosnian Muslims have begun to reexamine their relationship with their faith and have been strengthened in it.

Joelle Bahloul (Anthropology, Jewish Studies, REEl, and West European Studies) discussed the power of symbolism in thwarting a tolerant solution to the mixing of religions in Europe. Although Muslims form the second largest religious community in France, they are perceived as an alien element in the French body, because Islam has long been coded as “East” and Christianity as “West.”

Accordingly, Bahloul asked for a qualification of Shahrani’s conceptual distinction between religion and secularism: although Europe may appear secular, Christianity is nevertheless the defining element of European identity. The so-called New Europe, New West, and New Islam are, in Bahloul’s judgment, merely labels for repackaging ancient symbolic differences.

John Hanson (History, African Studies) stepped back and looked at the problems of the Islamic diaspora in Europe in historical perspective. African Muslims, he pointed out, usually mark the start of their history of interaction with Europe in the late eighteenth century, when Europe began to invade the Muslim world. Hanson, too, rejected the idea of Islamic radicalism as an important political force. Most Islamic leaders in Africa, he said, accommodated themselves to European imperialism. Modern anti-colonial movements were led by secularists voicing secular ideas, not Muslim ideas. As in Central Asia, no pan-Islamic resistance arose in Africa.

As for the diaspora in Europe, Hanson noted that people came there as temporary workers, not as Muslims. In time, many settled down in Europe and became Europeans, and now they are trying to construct communities for themselves in Europe. This is not an attack on the West but an effort on the part of Muslims to make a place for themselves in their new home.

The second day of the forum took place at the Omni Severin Hotel in Indianapolis as an outreach to the Indianapolis business, professional, and government community. The featured Continued on page 21
The dormitory in which I stayed was Spartan at best, my room having no hot water or shower. A heating unit in the window was turned on for my benefit, but for students there is no heat. Temperatures were in the forties Fahrenheit, both inside and outside the building. However, the hospitality of my Chinese hosts made the accommodations unimportant to me. I was escorted by one of their English language teachers wherever I wanted to go in the city and was even loaned a bicycle which I peddled five miles to downtown Ningbo.

In the evenings, I had as many as 12 students in my room, anxious to practice their English and absolutely fascinated by American culture and lifestyle. They asked no questions about American political and social issues, which may be the result of the unavailability of Western news media. Their only source of outside news is The China Daily, an English language publication that appears to be an official organ of the government.

All things considered, the most significant aspect of the trip for me was the educational potential I saw in these exchanges. There is so much to be learned from study abroad, not only about other cultures, but about our own, because of the way in which living in a foreign culture affects our perceptions of our own culture by providing contrasts.

For example, I questioned several faculty and students about China's one child per family policy. Their response in all cases was that it is an essential and reasonable policy for a country with over a billion people and because of the severe population pressure this puts on China's resources. (China has one-seventh of the arable land America has, with a population more than four times as large.) I sensed no resentment or bitterness toward the one-child policy. For me, it made our own failure to confront the problem of population control seem backward and irresponsible by comparison.

We have a lot to learn from one another through these exchanges. I look forward to a time when study abroad is available to all American students.

— David N. Silk

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