Terror prompts brooding on cultural divisions

After a series of attacks by home-grown Islamists, western governments are facing questions over their social policies. Should they accommodate a range of value systems or assert their own?

Farouk Youssoufa met Mina on the beaches of Marseille. He is a black man who was born on an island off the coast of Tanzania. His wife is a light-skinned Frenchwoman and the daughter of Algerian immigrants.

On the beaches, he says, ‘a lot of different communities mingle’. Some of Marseille’s 850,000 residents think the chance to enjoy the sun in each other’s company encourages social peace.

But in a city with high poverty levels and an estimated 40% Muslim population, tensions linger. In 2011, the French government banned prayers in the street, prompting defiance from hundreds of Muslims. There have been 15 years of legal wrangles over plans to build a grand mosque.

The policy of multiculturalism — promoting a variety of cultures — can be seen as a logical, tolerant extension of western liberalism. In Canada, where the government was the first to adopt an official policy of multiculturalism in 1971, a poll in 2007 found that Muslims were ‘the most contented in the developed world’.

But Islamist terrorist attacks in western societies, often committed by second- or third-generation immigrants, have raised doubts over its success. In recent years both David Cameron and Angela Merkel have declared it a ‘failure’.

In parts of Molenbeek, in Brussels, 90% of the population is Muslim. Some experts have warned that such segregation encourages the spread of politised forms of Islam which call for a subversion of democracy and hatred of permissive western society.

Security expert Claude Moniquet says this has given terrorists ‘a place to hide’. A suspect in the Paris attacks hid in Molenbeek for four months before being caught.

There is concern about the community leaders the state engages with. The British government treated the Muslim Council of Britain, which has been shown to have extremist links, as the official voice of Muslims for over a decade.

Writer Kenan Malik says this has ‘resulted in fragmented societies, the scapegoating of immigrants and the rise of both populist and Islamist rhetoric’. In Germany, where many Turkish immigrants retained their own culture but were denied citizenship, the result was similar.

Valued?

Difference should be celebrated, say some. Everyone has a stake in helping immigrant communities feel welcome. A host culture can learn from, and see its people enriched by, the customs of new arrivals. Telling minority groups how to behave only marginalises them.

We should stress our similarities, respond others. Free speech, democracy, the rule of law and women’s rights are universal values which provide the key to a healthy society. If the host promotes them with confidence, newcomers will be naturally inclined to accept them.

Q & A

Q: Do the values held by other people really affect me?
A: People’s values inform the way they interact with you and the society around you. In a globalised world, you are likely to encounter people with very different values to you. The question is how far you think you should assert the things you believe in.

Q: This is a tricky subject — can I escape from worrying about it?
A: That is fairly unlikely, especially if you live in a cosmopolitan city. But there are people who think the problems are an indictment of globalisation and people with different value systems are moving around too quickly. Others say interacting with people from different backgrounds brings benefits and will enrich you. Multiculturalists, then, usually believe in faster integration than assimilationists.
YOU DECIDE

1. Would you ever accept being asked to change your values?
2. Should governments promote a variety of cultures or their own?

ACTIVITIES

1. Re-write this article in your own words, using no more than five sentences.
2. Research one of the places mentioned in this article. Prepare a two-minute presentation on its policies towards immigrant communities. What have they done, and have their measures worked?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

‘Tolerance is a universal value.’

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Read this article on theday.co.uk for links to recommended videos and further reading.

WORD WATCH

Poverty – More than a quarter of people are below the poverty line and on estates in northern Marseille, where the city’s Muslim population is largely concentrated.

Estimated – According to World Population Review. Exact figures are not available, as the French government forbids municipal authorities from collecting data on their citizens’ religion. Some demographers have predicted that Marseille will soon become France’s first Muslim-majority city.

Tensions – Even between Muslim groups, relations can be unharmonious. Omar Djellil of the El Takwa mosque says: ‘people, because of their cultural affinities, prefer to stay among themselves.’

Banned – The government was concerned that the praying crowds were causing businesses to close and trapping non-Muslims in their homes.

Poll – For CBC News.

Extremist – The founders of the Muslim Council were linked to groups who had called for the death sentence for Salman Rushdie, author of the novel The Satanic Verses. One poll suggested that fewer than 10% of Muslims supported the group when it was created in 1997.

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