

## **Cultural Citizenship, Integration and the Representation of Muslim Minorities**

*Moustafa Bayoumi*

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 Muslims living in the West have found their loyalties to their states questioned and have endured greatly increased suspicion and occasionally outright hostility. Their very presence has become a political issue. Not only have their legal rights as citizens been questioned but their collective ability and willingness to integrate into various Western societies is also being doubted. This paper analyzes this state of affairs, the response to the loyalty question by intellectuals operating within Islamic theological traditions, and attempts by various arts organizations to illustrate more sympathetic treatments of Islamic culture to Western audiences. While intellectual rejoinders and arts diplomacy have their place in this debate, neither provides vehicles for illustrating the complex ways that Muslim minorities actually live their lives. The essay concludes by examining research on empathy as a model for dispelling prejudice and argues for more empathetic accounts in the public sphere representing the varieties of Muslim minority life; for such representations could also expand the notions of what citizenship means and the ways it is practiced in Western liberal democracies today.

At a town hall meeting held during the 2008 presidential race in the United States, Republican candidate John McCain was repeatedly harangued by his audience for the respect he had been showing Democratic candidate Barack Obama. Amid cries of people yelling “liar” and “terrorist” in reference to Obama, one man bluntly told McCain that

he's "scared" of an Obama presidency.<sup>1</sup> Another McCain supporter, Gayle Quinnel, offered her trepidations, "I can't trust Obama," she said. ("I got ya," McCain replied.) "I have read about him, and he's not, he's not ... he's an Arab." McCain began shaking his head. "No ma'am. No ma'am," he replied. "He's a decent family man, [a]citizen."<sup>2</sup>

This was a remarkable moment. First of all, Gayle Quinnel had confused being Arab with being Muslim as many in the United States continue to do (a later interview with her confirms this<sup>3</sup>). However, far more troubling was John McCain's response. In his attempt to set the woman straight and come to the defense of Barack Obama, McCain makes what he seems to think is an honorable statement. Yet, his proclamation utters several rather dishonorable things: it counterposes Arab ethnicity with decency, family values and – perhaps most importantly – citizenship in the United States (as if Arabs cannot be decent, cannot be family oriented and cannot be citizens). This was not the only time that Senator McCain had limited the pluralistic possibilities of the United States. In a 2007 interview with *Beliefnet.com*, he proclaimed that the Constitution establishes the United States as a Christian nation and that he would "prefer" someone "who has a solid grounding" in his faith when he was asked about the possibility of a Muslim running for president.<sup>4</sup> McCain also repeatedly invoked the "Judeo-Christian" values and principles of the country in a manner that left many American Muslims (and Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and many others) out in the cold.<sup>5</sup>

The Obama campaign of 2008 wasn't much better in affirming the citizenship of Muslim Americans in the United States. On one of its official websites the campaign called the labeling of Obama as a Muslim a "smear" (as if being called a Muslim is equivalent to being called a criminal).<sup>6</sup> Staffers in the campaign also moved two women wearing hijab out of a view of the television cameras during a Detroit campaign stop<sup>7</sup> and the campaign also pushed Mazen Asbahi, Obama's advisor to Muslim American communities, out of his position.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, while both McCain and Obama visited churches and synagogues during the campaign, neither made a stop at a mosque.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the US presidential campaign

of 2008 was not unique in exploiting fears of Muslims in the United States. Attempts to curry favor with voters by attacking (or blatantly sidelining) Muslim Americans have unfortunately become a regular feature of politics in the United States; Republican presidential hopeful Herman Cain's comment in April 2011 that he wouldn't appoint a Muslim to his administration because he has not found a Muslim who is loyal to the US Constitution is but one recent example.<sup>10</sup> Analysts may debate whether such tactics are actually expedient to politicians,<sup>11</sup> but these political attacks on Muslims are symptomatic of something larger than opportunistic electioneering.

### *Muslims Have Become a Political Issue*

Since the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11 Muslims living in the United States and other Western countries have found that their very presence has become a political issue. In the United States the concerns emanating out of the American-Muslim community during the first few years after the terrorist attacks were quite specific and directed mainly at the security apparatus of the State and how various law enforcement practices were directly targeting them, thus potentially hindering their ability to live their lives undisturbed and free of State surveillance and suspicion.<sup>12</sup> The same could be said of the United Kingdom, which also passed a series of laws loosening civil liberties protections in the wake of 9/11 that disproportionately affected Muslims in Britain.<sup>13</sup>

More recently, however, Muslims in the United States and in Europe have a new narrative to contend with, one that argues that Islam is not only incompatible with democracy but that Muslims in the West constitute a major threat to American and European ways of life. At its most extreme the narrative heralds a fabulous story that Muslims are on a "stealth jihad," beholden as they are to an ideology that is adept, perhaps uniquely so, at exploiting liberal notions of tolerance. The argument here is that multiculturalism actually enables Muslim cultural domination of its non-Muslim neighbors and that this "stealth jihad" is actually more insidious than even outright acts of terrorism. Through their "stealth jihad" Muslims

are supposedly leading Westerners inexorably toward the establishment of an oppressive Muslim theocratic state where there once stood a proud liberal democracy. A few years ago, this belief was held by a radical fringe of the conservative right fueled by demagogues such as Robert Spencer,<sup>14</sup> Mark Steyn<sup>15</sup> and Bat Ye'or.<sup>16</sup> Today, it has entered the mainstream of American and European discourse. In the United States at least 25 state legislatures have voted or are soon scheduled to vote on “Sharia ban” bills<sup>17</sup> to the dismay of civil libertarians,<sup>18</sup> the organized Muslim community<sup>19</sup> and many Jewish groups (who fear that the legislation may next impact or target Halachah<sup>20</sup>). To date, the most murderous expression of this theory occurred in Norway when Anders Behrens Breivik killed a total of 77 people on July 22, 2011 to protest what he saw as the “Islamization of Europe.”<sup>21</sup>

While the former narrative of suspicion of Muslims revolved primarily around security, for it assumed that Muslims in Western societies have a greater likelihood to be potential terrorists or terrorist sympathizers than non-Muslims, the latter operates more along the axis of culture. Thus, acts of cultural expression and the straightforward activities of Muslim daily life have now become suspicious on other levels beyond impending violence. These include Muslims constructing houses of worship (the minaret ban in Switzerland, for example), Muslims dressing according to their traditions (niqab bans in several European countries) or Muslims seeking accommodation for their religious practices in the workplace or school (see the debate over foot baths in public restrooms at the University of Michigan-Dearborn<sup>22</sup>). All are seen as evidence of orchestrated Muslim assertion and the concomitant weak will of liberal values to repel a coming cultural invasion, thus explaining the perceived need, among anti-Muslim campaigners, to resort to legislative bans over liberal dialogue.

The current situation could be summed up in this way: Muslims may be statutory citizens, often first or second or third-generation immigrants to these states, but their citizenship is to be feared since they are doctrinally predisposed to abuse the privileges of citizenship to usurp the rights of other, more established citizens. In the United States and even

more so in Europe, the figure of the Muslim functions as a political and cultural symbol of what is not American or European. This supposed otherness of Islam within the borders of the nation and the purportedly strange, wily and dangerous cultural habits of Muslims in their midst, becomes a way for many in the United States and Europe to define their own identities by being fundamentally in opposition to their own Muslim citizens. The fact that many people, myself included, find these arguments of Muslim cultural domination alarmist and even a little bit silly goes without saying, but the growing cultural power of the notion that Muslims don't deserve full citizenship rights merits investigation and raises important questions about what it means to be a citizen in a pluralistic Western liberal democracy. To address this question one should turn to the scholarly literature on citizenship, which is undeniably huge. A starting point, however, could be historian Rogers Smith's discussion of the concept of citizenship in the United States.

Smith describes the official account of what defines an American citizen as one who "embrace[s] egalitarian, liberal, republican political principles." This is a seemingly uncontroversial definition but Smith finds it inadequate, noting the "inegalitarian legal provisions that have shaped the participants and substance of American politics throughout history."<sup>23</sup> In other words, citizenship in the United States has not historically been reserved for those who subscribe to egalitarian, liberal, republican principles and those who did hold those views were often still denied citizenship. Smith argues against scholars who posit that US citizenship was essentially, or manifestly, universal but occasionally held back by hidden or latent restrictions. He writes:

When restrictions on voting rights, naturalization, and immigration are taken into account, it turns out that for over 80 percent of US history, American laws declared most people in the world legally ineligible to become full US citizens solely because of their race, original nationality, or gender. For at least two-thirds of American history, the majority of the domestic adult population was also ineligible for full citizenship for the same reason. Those racial, ethnic and gender restrictions were blatant, not 'latent.' For these

people, citizenship rules gave no weight to how liberal, republican, or faithful to other American values their political beliefs may be.<sup>24</sup>

The value of Smith's contribution here is his illustration of the varying and contingent nature of citizenship. He also shows that the idea of the liberal state guaranteeing equal rights to all of its members is a continuing rather than complete project. In other words, citizenship is not only a concept, it is also a dynamic condition with real-world consequences that has as much to do with exclusion as they do with inclusion. Today, it is Muslim minorities in the West (among others) who are feeling the brunt of exclusionary politics articulated through the rhetoric of citizenship. Smith shows how citizenship is a juridical category decided by law and policed at the border and how citizenship should mean that one ought to have the same rights as other citizens in the nation. In fact, citizenship today is still the primary mechanism by which our human rights are guaranteed. In a world of nation-states, to have a nation, that is to be a citizen, is to have as memorably described by Hannah Arendt, "the right to have rights."<sup>25</sup> In Western liberal democracies, citizenship also offers certain key privileges including voting and running for office. In a pluralist society citizenship ought not to mean that everyone must think or be the same, only that they collectively hold to core principles such as tolerance of each other, respect for the law and the belief that the law be applied equally to all.

Yet citizenship is more than a legal category; it is also a moral category since it assumes loyalty to the state and additionally it is an emotive category, since people are (usually) expected to feel like they are citizens of a nation and to act accordingly. Anthropologists over the last generation have thus developed the notion of cultural citizenship, the idea that one has "the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong."<sup>26</sup> The anthropological notion of "cultural citizenship" is important to understanding the status of Muslim minorities in the West for it is currently where their citizenship rights are usually either denied or affirmed.<sup>27</sup>

### *Clashing Civilizations?*

Why are Muslim citizenship rights currently being questioned in a number of Western liberal democracies? Part of the answer certainly comes from current political tensions and hostilities around the world and part of it would seem to derive from longstanding Western assumptions about Muslims generally. The terrible events of 9/11, the 7/7 bombings in London and other terrorist attacks have increased the pressure on Western Muslims to demonstrate that they are not threats to public order. The wars currently raging in countries with large Muslim populations also fuel feelings of distrust and animosity from many different sides, often expressed far afield from the theaters of war. The Danish cartoon controversy in 2006 is a case in point. In a specific time of extreme political tension exacerbated by current overseas wars and domestic terrorism, many European Muslim leaders felt they were unfairly demeaned and their concerns unheeded when a Danish newspaper published its provocative cartoons of their Prophet. Meanwhile, proponents of publishing the cartoons saw this as evidence of Muslim hyper-sensitivity and an inherent Muslim lack of respect for free-speech rights. The Danish cartoon controversy, and its global explosion, was certainly enabled by conflicts born out of today's global "war on terror."<sup>28</sup> But the tensions surrounding Muslim citizenship are often articulated as being beyond contemporary politics and essentially part of a centuries-long clash of civilizations that is as inexorable as it is inevitable—an idea that, as Edward Said points out, is full of "lazy generalizations... reckless distortions of history [and] wholesale demagoguery of civilizations into categories like irrational and enraged."<sup>29</sup>

This clash of civilization thesis tends to move the debates around Muslim citizenship from (often discriminatory) policy disputes centered on politics and policing to (often superficial) arguments interpreting culture and history. Consider Christopher Caldwell's well-received 2009 book *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West* in this regard.<sup>30</sup> In this rather panic-ridden and Malthusian-derived text Caldwell assumes the old 'clash of civilizations' thesis

combined with demographic anxiety and disquiet over a lack of resolve of Europeans to face squarely some kind of Muslim invasion. “For 1,400 years, Islam and Christianity have opposed one another, violently at times. We are living through one of those times,” Caldwell proclaims.<sup>31</sup> The most worrisome part of the current clash for him is that in Europe 10 percent of the population is composed of immigrants, many of them from Muslim countries. “Since its arrival half a century ago,” Caldwell writes, “Islam has broken – or required adjustments to, or rearguard defenses of – a good many of the European customs, received ideas and state structures with which it has come in contact.” Labeling Islam an “adversary culture,”<sup>32</sup> Caldwell posits that “Muslim culture is unusually full of messages laying out the practical advantages of procreation”<sup>33</sup> and concludes, paradoxically when one considers the history, that “Islam” is on its way to colonizing Europe.<sup>34</sup> In Caldwell’s reading, Islam in Europe is further responsible for much of the crime,<sup>35</sup> poverty<sup>36</sup> and terrorism<sup>37</sup> on the continent. It intimidates its critics into silence,<sup>38</sup> promotes loyalty to its creed over the nation,<sup>39</sup> and forces sexual subjugation on its followers.<sup>40</sup> Caldwell concludes his tract stating, “It is certain that Europe will emerge changed from its confrontation with Islam. It is far less certain that Islam will prove assimilable. Europe finds itself in a contest with Islam for the allegiance of its newcomers. For now, Islam is the stronger party in that contest.”<sup>41</sup>

Other critics focus their aim on Muslim citizenship rights through examining European responses to their Muslims immigrants. In the case of the United Kingdom, Christian Joppke concludes that British policies of Muslim integration are doomed to failure because they won’t take into account the real problems.<sup>42</sup> For Joppke, these include Islamic cultural norms and self-segregation, both of which are deflected through wrongheaded British attempts of symbolic recognition of Islam in the public sphere, which Muslims and their supporters opportunistically exploit. Still other critics are even more pointed in their assessments of minority Muslim politics. Asked whether Europe will be a superpower by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bernard Lewis responded ominously: “Europe,” he said, “will be part of the Arabic West, of the Maghreb.”<sup>43</sup>

Caldwell, Lewis and Joppke do not invent their narratives out of thin air (although their evidence is often as thin as air). There are segments, tiny as they are, within Western Muslim communities that also advocate the clash of civilizations thesis and they often promote the idea either that Sharia will eventually rule over Western lands or that the *ummah* (the global Muslim community) will be united by a caliphate. Such notions can be found in fringe groups such as the Muslims Against Crusades, Hizbut Tahrir, and al-Muhajiroun. At a recent rally of 200 people in front of the American Embassy in London organized by Muslims against Crusades against the killing of Osama bin Laden, one member of the group held up a sign saying “Islam will dominate the world,”<sup>44</sup> and Muslims Against Crusades makes its position clear on its webpage. In response to the question “If you hate this country, why don’t you get out?” They write: “as Muslims ... we are ... working to transform Britain into a flourishing Islamic State and we urge anyone who does not like this to leave.”<sup>45</sup> A 20-year old internal document written by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States calls upon the Brotherhood to assume a “grand jihad [devoted to] eliminating and destroying the Western civilization from within.”<sup>46</sup>

The fact that these groups and ideas command virtually zero respect among the vast majority of Muslims in the United States and Europe is too often neglected (or deliberately overlooked by some). Polls repeatedly indicate Muslims are loyal to their states: an ICM poll of British Muslims in 2006 found that 91 percent felt personally loyal to Britain;<sup>47</sup> a 2009 Gallup poll found that 80 percent of French Muslims considered themselves loyal to France;<sup>48</sup> and a 2011 Gallup poll in the United States discovered that 93 percent of American Muslims considered themselves loyal to their country.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, anti-Muslim polemicists rely on the idea that such fringe expressions of cultural domination are the true expressions of a hidden disloyalty among Muslims, offering up polling data that reveal how Muslims feel alienated from their host countries as evidence of their flimsy loyalties.<sup>50</sup> This produces a peculiar and frustrating state of affairs for Muslim minority publics. First of all, media representations gravitate towards spokespeople from the radical fringe

(who are all too comfortable in the spotlight). Secondly, anti-Muslim polemicists forcefully push the idea that all Muslims are untrustworthy and openly speak falsehoods, which as a consequence frequently renders Muslim minorities virtually mute in the public sphere, for almost anything they say will be used against them in the court of public opinion.

### *Defensive Citizens*

This situation often puts Muslim elites in Western countries on the defensive and many Muslim public intellectuals and scholars of Islam in and of the West spend much of their energy today dispelling loyalty questions by working within the Islamic tradition. Andrew Marsh, for example, questions whether “Islam can provide believers with resources for affirming citizenship in a non-Muslim liberal democracy,” eventually concluding that “firm and culturally authentic Islamic values exist which can ground Islamically a social contract between Muslims and a non-Muslim liberal democracy.”<sup>51</sup> Tariq Ramadan, in his book *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, likewise invests in the idea that the Muslims must not live in the mentality of either “the ghetto or dissolution.”<sup>52</sup> For Ramadan, the old Muslim legal concepts of *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-harb* are outdated and he introduces a new one: *dar al-shahadeh*, the abode of witness: “Muslims living in the West, individuals as well as communities from various countries, not only *may* live there but are also the bearers of an enormous responsibility: they must give their society as testimony [shahadeh] based on faith, spirituality, values, a sense of where boundaries lie, and a permanent human and social engagement.”<sup>53</sup>

The work of Ramadan and Marsh and others is clearly relevant and, in the face of ideological distortions about Islam from arch conservatives in both East and West, it’s not surprising that some urgency is felt to redefine what Islam is after it has been so variously and often viciously defined by others. But is there not a fundamental mistake in locating the debates around citizenship and integration between the terms “Islam” and “West,” as if the terms were equal and opposite to each other? The latter

describes a specific geography and the former a universal faith system. What is needed, in other words, is less talk about Islam and more about Muslims and Muslim life and the varieties of the religious (and non-religious) experiences that Muslims have in the West if we are interested in understanding the stakes and contours surrounding citizenship and integration of Muslim minorities.

### *Varieties of Muslim Experiences*

Muslims in the West come from every corner of the world. In the United States, Muslim Americans hail from 69 different countries and practice their faith in myriad ways<sup>54</sup> and their religious and daily experiences cannot be adequately subsumed by debates around doctrine. The same could be said for Muslims in Europe. Many practice their faith according to their country-of-origin traditions; many do not. Some abandon their faith in the West; others become more pious. Second and third-generation Muslims also have different experiences from their first-generation elders. Mosque participation could be a simple indicator that Muslim life is incredibly varied and difficult to qualify and describe fully. A Dutch government study has shown, for example, that only 35 percent of Dutch Muslims attend a mosque at least once a month. Dutch Protestants in fact have higher levels of church attendance than Dutch Muslims.<sup>55</sup> In the United States, a third of American Muslims (34 percent) rarely or never attend mosque services.<sup>56</sup> In France, only five percent go to Friday prayers regularly.<sup>57</sup>

To point this out is not to say that Western Muslims are irreligious; it is only to say that their experiences are multiple and cannot be understood or sufficiently defined by elite intellectual debate or gross polemics. And yet, the forces with which Western Muslims must contend – including sensationalist media representation from loudmouth spokesmen speaking in their name to conservative populist wrath directed against them – constantly construct the object of the Muslim as a monolithic one (or sometimes in a good Muslim versus bad Muslim dichotomy). Such thinking enables the construction of the Muslim as the dangerous ‘other’

to a significant degree. In this universe it matters little what one Muslim's actual beliefs are. As long as one can be identified as a Muslim – by name, national origin, skin color, dress, etc. – one is assumed to be predisposed to unegalitarian, illiberal and anti-republican positions. As soon as Muslim individuals are judged on the basis of their collective attributes as member of this doctrine, debates over theological doctrine matter little since the issue now is fundamentally one of social discrimination. “The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew,” John Paul Sartre writes in his book *Anti-Semite and Jew*. “That is the simple truth from which we must start.”<sup>58</sup> The same is now true for Muslims in the West.

Too many Muslim intellectuals and leaders and their defenders in the West seem to believe that explaining the true Islam is the key to dispelling contemporary prejudice against Muslims without perhaps realizing how to many non-Muslims the rhetoric often sounds defensive, hollow and apologetic. In fact, Muslims in the West are plagued by an excess of definitions of Islam in the public sphere coming from all quarters along with a lack of context of the politics of the Middle East and basic ignorance over the varieties of Muslim experiences. A better approach to adopt for intellectuals, writers and leaders interested in accessing the truth of the experience of a Muslim minority would be to argue for Muslim minority rights on the basis of full citizenship, not on the commonalities between “Islam” and “the West.” If they are to mean anything at all, citizenship rights must be equally applicable to all. Thus, Western Muslim elites should also be willing to advocate for the citizenship rights of all, not just Muslims, and they ought to demand their own equal rights on the basis of a shared citizenship.

The debates over Park 51, the so-called Ground Zero Mosque in New York, are an interesting study in this regard. The free exercise of religion and the right to property are two fundamental rights in the United States and when Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf and real-estate developer Sharif el-Gamal announced their plans for the center in December of 2009, no controversy brewed. In fact, there was initially some mild praise for the endeavor.<sup>59</sup> Months later, however, the project tore up the headlines, attracting thousands of demonstrators proclaiming their opposition to the

“victory mosque,” loudly expressing their fear of Sharia coming to the land and drew rather scary comments from politicians across the spectrum. Republican New Gringrich compared the center to “Nazis ... put[ting] up a sign next to the holocaust museum.”<sup>60</sup> Right-wing opposition to all things Muslim has sadly come to be expected. What is more surprising is the Muslim opposition to Park 51. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Tariq Ramadan claimed the proposed project was misplaced. “No doubt, it is the legitimate right of Muslims to build a community center near Ground Zero,” he explained. “Yet, I believe it is not a wise decision, considering the collective sensitivities in American society. This is a moment to go beyond rights and reach for the common good: To build it elsewhere, if possible, would be a sensible and symbolic move.”<sup>61</sup>

But Ramadan misses the point. You can’t claim your rights by sacrificing your rights. What it means to be an American or a Swede or Briton is precisely to demand the same rights that are accorded the general public. Anything more is unacceptable, but anything less is to subscribe to the “ghetto mentality” that Ramadan is so concerned about. (Ramadan seems out of touch when he writes, “With more active involvement, Muslims can get a deeper sense of what it means to be American, to feel more confident, to communicate and interact with their fellow citizens.”<sup>62</sup>) Muslims and non-Muslims must see each other as united in the complex project of living in a society together with recognition of everyone’s histories, hopes and aspirations and with blind mechanisms to adjudicate those aspirations if and when contradictions or conflicts arise. Shared principles, not loud passions, are what build a society.

### *Arts Diplomacy*

The debates around Muslim citizenship rights still tend to center on the dichotomy of “Islam” and “the West,” even from those dedicated to overcoming contemporary conflicts. In the United States, for example, many people on the liberal side of the political spectrum have been engaged in honorable attempts to mediate the “Islam and the West divide” through arts diplomacy, but here too the concepts of “Islam” and “the

West” remain intact. Major institutions of the American cultural establishment, from the Kennedy Center<sup>63</sup> to the New York Public Library<sup>64</sup> to the Metropolitan Museum of Art<sup>65</sup> have all held major exhibitions or symposia on Islam, Arab culture, or a broadly defined “Muslim culture” (which, by defining culture as “Muslim” is unfortunately often tinged with its own kind of liberal Orientalism). In July 2010 the Asia Society in New York also held a Sufi Music Festival,<sup>66</sup> attracting 5,000 people to Union Square in New York for one of its events. Zeba Rahman, one of the organizers, told me that she sees her work as a cultural producer to be crucial in reducing the tensions of the moment and building bridges of sympathy in a climate of extreme polarization.<sup>67</sup> Poet’s House in New York City ran a symposium in May 2011 titled “Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World” funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities Bridging Cultures program. The symposium included pre-Islamic poetry of the Najd, Yemeni tribal poetry, the revolutionary poetry of the current Egyptian revolution, postmodern Iranian poetry and the Marxist poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.<sup>68</sup> While such artistic production gets little hearing in the United States, the problem is that it was subsumed under the term of “Islamic” poetry, even when the verse in question had little to do with religion. Other regions of the world with large Muslim populations and cultural legacies, including South East Asia, were left unrepresented and minority religious cultures in the Muslim world were rendered mute.

Through such arts diplomacy one discovers the desire to imbue a kind of cultural citizenship, either global or local or both, to Muslims, but the problem with these approaches is that such representation of “Islam,” even in their sympathetic application, still tend to subsume everything under the religion. Everything else simply disappears. In other words, projects built on bridging cultures inherently run a risk of reifying “Islam” and “the West” into opposing categories that will in the best possible scenario be connected through a kind of sympathetic understanding of the other. While they are noble undertakings in their own right, sympathetic understanding of the other may actually do little to guarantee the cultural citizenship rights of an embattled minority.

### *The Limits of Sympathy, The Politics of Empathy*

To a significant degree the problem facing Muslim minorities in the West is a problem of representation. Muslims are everywhere in the media but how Muslim minorities actually live their lives is barely represented, leaving the representational field almost entirely empty and thus free to be filled by various ideological distortions and hateful stereotypes. This helps explain why straightforward acts of Muslim cultural expression are now too often misinterpreted as acts of domination; for the representation of the counterweight, i.e. daily life, is acutely missing. Arts diplomacy attempts to respond to this impoverished state of representation by bridging ideological constructs between “Islam” and “the West,” but it relies on the idea of Western sympathy for Islamic culture to accomplish its goals. The idea of sympathy itself may be part of the representational problem here and empathy may in fact be more constructive. In English, sympathy and empathy are closely related terms, even though sympathy has a much longer history in the language dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century according to the Oxford English Dictionary.<sup>69</sup> Sympathy connotes “fellow-feeling” for another person insofar as sympathy is “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other.” Empathy, on the other hand, entered the English language in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a translation of the German term *Einfühlung*.<sup>70</sup> According to the literary critic M.H. Abrams, empathy “signifies an identification of oneself with an observed person or object which is so close that one seems to participate in the posture, motion and sensation that one observes.”<sup>71</sup> Sympathy can connote charity; empathy carries with it the potential not just for understanding the emotions of another person but for experiencing those emotions as if they were one’s own. Suzanne Keen summarizes the difference this way: A statement of empathy would be “I feel your pain,” whereas a statement of sympathy would be “I feel pity for your pain.”<sup>72</sup>

In recent years the study of empathy has generated a great deal of scrutiny from social scientists, humanists, psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and literary critics who seek to understand the motivations

behind empathy, linking it to altruistic behavior and moral actions and greatly expanding interest in empathy studies. “Emotional response to others’ condition has been seen as providing a basis for mature sympathy, morality and social arrangements that seek the common good,” writes Keen.<sup>73</sup> “Philosophers since David Hume and Adam Smith have argued this point and recent evolutionary psychology has embraced the notion of the adaptive function of reciprocal altruism. A great deal more than shared sensations is attributed to human empathy.”<sup>74</sup>

Empathy can be a powerful political emotion. In a study about the culture wars in the United States, psychologists Peter Ditto and Spassena Koleva have shown how “empathy gaps” in the political culture of the United States contribute to a fiercely divided public. They conclude that “our insensitivity to moral intuitions that differ from our own can create moral empathy gaps that fuel partisan conflict by obscuring the logic and intentions of those who oppose us in political debates.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, if we cannot imagine how others come to form their beliefs, we have little chance of engaging in substantive dialogue over our differences. They write that, “Research confirms that people have particular difficulty predicting the preferences and behavior of people whose affective states differ from their own,” labeling this phenomenon “gut-blindness.”<sup>76</sup> They conclude: “A possible consequence of this ‘gut-blindness’ is a tendency to attribute differences not to differing moral sensibilities, but to more accessible social-cognitive constructs such as intellectual deficiency or malevolent intention.”<sup>77</sup> This conclusion would seem to apply to how Muslim minority publics are often misunderstood and how evil intent is so easily applied to them. They suffer, in other words, from an “empathy gap.”

Ditto and Koleva’s research focuses on an essentially equally divided field—between political liberals and conservatives in the United States. Studies here have also extended to empathy and reconciliation in war settings. In an article published in *Human Rights Quarterly* physicians Jodi Halpern and Harvey Weinstein locate the key difference between empathy and sympathy and seek to understand how empathy enables reconciliation.<sup>78</sup> (Their paper begins with the assessment “that it is

interpersonal ruins, rather than ruined building and institutions, that pose the greatest challenge for rebuilding society.<sup>79</sup>) “Empathy,” they write, “differs from sympathy in that it entails seeking the individual perspective of another person rather than generalizing or stereotyping.”<sup>80</sup> (My argument here is that even arts diplomacy unwittingly traffics in generalizations and stereotypes.) For Halpern and Weinstein, “empathy involves being genuinely curious about another person. In contrast, war involves closing one’s mind toward the other’s experiences and presuming that one can already predict the other’s behavior.”<sup>81</sup> (We should note how this point echoes Ditto and Koleva’s research.) Finally, they conclude, “empathy involves emotional as well as cognitive openness and tolerating the ambivalence this might arouse.”<sup>82</sup>

Through informant interviews, focus groups and survey data drawn from survivors of war – primarily the wars in the former Yugoslavia – Halpern and Weinstein discovered that “co-existence without empathy is both superficial and fragile,”<sup>83</sup> even when overt conflict is absent. Empathy is a key component to “rehumanizing the other”<sup>84</sup> and empathy should be “a normative ideal after mass violence.”<sup>85</sup> “The goal of empathy is to see the world *from* the complex perspective of another person,”<sup>86</sup> even if that person is a perpetrator of violence. “Without seeing the events through the enemies’ eyes there is little to help one tolerate disagreement and reconciliation may never be achieved.”<sup>87</sup> Halpern and Weinstein underline that, “empathy involves perceiving the other’s complex point of view, [but] it does not require accepting the other’s view”<sup>88</sup> just as they acknowledge that social forces are often significant barriers to reconciliation.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, one of their primary pieces of evidence is drawn not from their own interviews but from Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovic’s 2001 fictional film *No Man’s Land*,<sup>90</sup> thus drawing an unstated connection between aesthetic projects of representation and the political effects of empathy. In the end, Halpern and Weinstein are invested in proving how empathy is an important emotion to hold, but have not been able to show how it will necessarily motivate action.

C. Daniel Batson – perhaps the preeminent authority on empathy in the United States (in the field of psychology at least) – has sought to

investigate the link between empathy and action. In an article titled “Empathy, Attitudes, and Action: Can Feeling for a Member of a Stigmatized Group Motivate One to Help the Group?” Batson and his colleagues asked, “whether empathy felt for a member of a stigmatized group leads to increased readiness not only to help that specific individual but also help the group, independent of benefit to the specific individual.”<sup>91</sup> They believed it would and devised a study to test their hypothesis. They also sought to determine if fictional characters could elicit an empathetic response that would likewise induce the subject into action. They write:

Results of our experiment suggest that the more positive attitudes toward a stigmatized group evoked by empathy felt for a member of the group do carry over into action to benefit the group. Of importance, our results suggest that this readiness to help the group is not simply a reflection of the well-known tendency for those induced to feel empathy for a person in need to help relieve that individual’s need. We found that the more positive attitudes evoked by empathy led to increased helping of the group in a way that could not benefit the individual for whom empathy was felt.<sup>92</sup>

While Batson and his colleagues did not find conclusive evidence between fiction and empathy as a motivator to action, they did find enough of a connection to confirm that, “the belief that inducing empathy for a fictional character can be used to improve attitudes and stimulate concern for a stigmatized group may well be valid.”<sup>93</sup>

Empathy, in other words, holds a pre-eminent place when attempting to bridge the gap between groups who are at odds with each other because of seemingly insurmountable differences or who are former enemies in war or who exist in a hierarchy where there is significant social stigmatization. Projects that honestly seek to channel our empathetic responses may in the end be more successful in bringing estranged groups together than ideological debates. Moreover, empathy is also an aesthetic project (it should not surprise us that its roots in English are through literary criticism). It depends on representation as a way of breaking down the wall of identity that can often seem intransigent and intractable.

Projects promoting empathy of Muslim minority populations carry with them significant potential to promote understanding and co-existence.

### *Cultural Citizenship and Representation*

Anti-Muslim polemicists will certainly continue their ideological assault against Muslim minorities in the West and the public will continue to be influenced by their rhetoric and distortions. What we need then are many more empathetic accounts of what Muslim minority life is about. Clearly this is an uphill battle, as the figure of the Muslim and ideological debates surrounding Islam continue to significantly limit the possibilities of Muslims representing themselves or of the field of Muslim representation expanding beyond its current impoverished state. Nevertheless, the project of representing Muslim life more fully and accurately is urgently required. It is in fact closely connected to what the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls “cultural citizenship.”

Rosaldo terms cultural citizenship a “deliberate oxymoron, a pair of words that do not go together comfortably.”<sup>94</sup> Cultural citizenship, he explains, “refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense.”<sup>95</sup> He continues:

It [cultural citizenship] claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others. The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one's destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions.<sup>96</sup>

The anthropological project of cultural citizenship is about representing the varied experiences of minority groups in order to expand the idea of what makes a person a citizen. Ultimately, it is a project of representation and self-representation based on how people actually live their lives. Cultural citizenship pays attention to “the everyday processes whereby people, especially immigrants, are made into subjects of a particular nation-state.”<sup>97</sup> Aiwa Ong refers to cultural citizenship as “the cultural

practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory.”<sup>98</sup> According to Ong, to understand the mechanisms of belonging through the lens of cultural citizenship one must also “attend to the various regulatory regimes in state agencies and civil society.”<sup>99</sup>

One important state agency where notions of belonging are articulated is the justice system, and here too we find a frequently contested ground for Muslim citizenship rights. Consider two cases involving spousal abuse, one in Germany and the other in the United States. Both cases caused great outcry from those who believed that Islamic law was infiltrating the legal systems of their countries and thus, the law was seen as a site producing Muslim cultural domination when the opposite was in fact the case. Through the dubious legal strategy of “cultural defense,” Muslims as a group were rendered not as subjects capable of determining right from wrong but as unthinking objects of an overwhelming faith system. In Germany a judge in 2007 ruled against a Muslim woman who was seeking accelerated divorce proceedings from her husband who was violently abusing her. The judge claimed the husband was acting in accordance with his Moroccan cultural background and by the rules of the Qur’an. The judge also came to her conclusion entirely on her own (the husband offered no such defense) and German Muslim leaders rejected the logic stating, “Our prophet never struck a woman, and he is our example.”<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, the case caused an outburst in Germany from both left- and right-wing circles that Islamic law was now above the German constitution. In 2010 a similar case in New Jersey saw a Muslim wife seeking a restraining order on her husband who was abusing her, demanding she have relations with him whenever he wanted. The trial judge ruled against the woman stating that the husband believed he was within his rights as ordained by his religion. (Thankfully, both the New Jersey and the German rulings were eventually overturned.) Writing about the appeals court judgment reversing the trial judge’s decision, Abed Awad, a prominent New Jersey lawyer who represents many Muslim women in family court, stated, “the ruling is a good first step toward

undoing a misperception that Muslim culture condones violence against women. In fact, the ruling is consistent with Islamic law, which prohibits spousal abuse.”<sup>101</sup>

What was remarkable about both of these cases was the assumption on the part of these (non-Muslim) judges to speak for Islam and to subscribe spousal abuse as a legitimate Muslim practice (which it is not), all the while ignoring the Muslim women’s suffering in these scenarios. The judges in these cases are thus representing Muslim life not just in stereotypical patterns but in such a fashion that actively suppressed the rights of the Muslim women involved and contradicted the ways that the mainstream Muslim leaders understood the practices of their faith and responsibilities of their citizenship. In their illusory respect for difference, cultural defense strategies in the law blame a monolithic culture for the “bad behavior” of minorities. (Law professor Leti Volpp has determined that cultural defense is almost exclusively invoked when minority defendants are on trial and it assumes minorities are beholden to their culture before they are obligated to uphold universal principles of human rights.<sup>102</sup>) In this example, the actions of the judges produced a legal system that ended up limiting the citizenship rights of Muslims even while putatively taking those rights into account, at least until the cases were corrected upon appeal.

Representation plays a role here. As Yamine Yildiz points out about the 2007 German case, the woman who took the case to court was almost completely ignored by the media after attention to the case exploded in Germany. Made virtually invisible, she was interviewed just once and her self-representation was at odds with how she was represented in the German media. According to Yildiz the woman (a Moroccan immigrant with German citizenship) took “issue with the judge not just for ruling against her but also for misinterpreting Islam.”<sup>103</sup> In her interview she “states that the Prophet never beat women but rather gave them rights. For her future, she envisions a new relationship in which she can ‘live the real Islam. With all of my rights.’”<sup>104</sup> Yildiz notes that:

[t]he woman’s interpretation of her situation and her religion thus differs radically from that of the judge as well as that promoted in

much German media. The ultimate invisibility of this different perspective indicates that the judge and the media actually share the same horizon, one in which the ‘abused Muslim woman’ does not count as a legitimate participant in the discourse if her positions do not fit their preconceptions.<sup>105</sup>

Once again, Muslim minorities are spoken for rather than heard from, and in that shift they are positioned in ideologically useful ways that end up denying the complexities of their lives and advancing the simple story of a nation under the threat of an outside culture. Yildiz describes it this way:

Instead of being individuals with complex stories, such as the Moroccan-German woman of the court case, (abused Muslim women in Germany) are subsumed under a preexisting narrative. Turned into reified figures, they are neither the subject nor the object of these discourses, but rather their vehicles. Yet the figures themselves occupy an ambivalent position in discourse. They are simultaneously an absolute non-European Other and, increasingly, a stand-in for a threatened European Self. As the slippage from the abuse of the woman to the abuse of the German state indicates, the woman does not stand for Islam but for a Germany threatened by the force of Islam and, in extension, for a liberal European order at risk.<sup>106</sup>

Other kinds of representations are desperately needed. By examining the cultural citizenship rights of Muslims more thoroughly we can discover something else beside anxiety from the dominant culture over national definitions of identity. Rather, what could become visible to the general public are the many ways that Muslim minority populations live their lives overwhelmingly according to their own convictions within the broad boundaries of shared national values, and in ways that may be different from the practices assumed by the general public as practices of citizenship and daily life, thus expanding our notions of national belonging. But to date the representation of the variety of Muslim minority life in the West continues to be terribly thin. To relegate the representation of Muslim life to terror dramas on television like *24* or *Sleeper Cell*, to news channels such as Fox News and CNN, and to films such as *Traitor* and *Sex and the City 2* is to abdicate the possibilities of representation to ideology.

More empathetic narratives are needed, not to portray Muslims in a positive light (which is also ideological) but to represent the cultural citizenship of Muslim minorities in all of its complexity.

This is the approach I adopted when composing *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America*.<sup>107</sup> In this book, I attempted to describe the post-9/11 lives of seven young Arab Americans (six Muslim Arab Americans and one Christian Arab American) as richly as I could, not so that their lives illustrated Muslim doctrine or Arab mores but so that the texture of their lives was preeminent and made available to curious readers willing to empathize with their situations. My narratives included a young woman who was detained with her family on spurious suspicions of terrorism; an Arab-American soldier who fought two tours in Iraq; a young Iraqi American woman who battles her conservative family; a young Palestinian American who works as an intern for Al-Jazeera and believes the experience will launch a media career only to have his hopes dashed; and a Muslim-American teenager who wins an election for her high school student government only to have her position taken away because she won't, due to her religious beliefs, participate in the school dances. (She eventually challenges her school on the principles of equality and reasonable accommodation.) The idea was to acknowledge the dehumanization of contemporary discourses surrounding Muslims in the United States and to use narrative to rehumanize these lives.

I believe these types of stories matter a great deal and they won't be told by polemicists like Caldwell or intellectuals like Ramadan. They show how Muslim minority life cannot be distilled into mere ideological debate. In fact, Muslims are almost never plotting to overthrow the state and they are not forever besieged by intolerant Westerners fearful of an Islamic menace. Rather, they live their lives in a rich variety of ways and often in complicated relationships with the dominant culture. If we can acknowledge their ways of being citizens we will be acknowledging the concept of cultural citizenship generally. Rich narratives of Muslim life carry within them the potential to alter already debased debates on Muslims and their loyalties and to expand the imaginations of what citizenship actually means.