Muslims living in a non-Muslim cultural majority context, no different than others, face profound internal and external challenges. Their concern for survival of their values, traditions, culture, identity and their distinct features, however, leads them to a variety of responses. Impressed by the enormity of the dominant culture, some develop an assimilative approach and in order to adjust with the dominant tradition allow a gradual dilution of their values and pattern of behaviour. Some others insist on making no accommodation and rigidly try to observe traditional religious and social norms in their personal and public matters. They often dissociate themselves from activities considered by them contrary to their cultural and religious values. This rather defensive and exclusivist approach gives them a sense of security, survival and self preservation. They even consider the North American Amish and Mormon models as viable and consider developing areas of their own concentrations as a fortress for their sub-culture, and a means to protect their ideology from any external influences and distortions.

A third trend also exists which is convinced about its identity and distinct culture but at the same time considers Islam more than a personal faith. According to the exponents of this trend, Islam carries a message for the whole of humanity therefore instead of withdrawing and fortifying themselves they are inclined to interact with others. An ongoing dialogue and engagement with others, in their view, is an imperative for da’wah.

The present collection of scholarly papers tries to look into the existential reality of the Muslim communities in the west, more specifically to the issues and problems encountered by them in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Britain, Bulgaria, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Australia, Canada and the US. The authors represent a nearly even number of Muslims who are themselves part of the Muslim community in the west as well as non-Muslims who look critically into the issues.

At the top of the agenda are the issues of education, identity and nature of loyalty to the land of their origin and the land of their choice. Added to it is also the issue of sustainability of values. The dominant western culture and system is generally based on secular values, which do recognize role of religion in a limited personal and private space. Islam, essentially a societal faith, however, does not accept this divide. How to reconcile with this dilemma which exists today not only in the western society and culture but equally in
the so called Muslim world under the leadership of western educated elite, beaurocracy, army and civil society. These essays look critically at these issues and offer an analysis of the situation.

The presence and development of sub-cultures in the traditional west is a historic reality. These sub-cultures have had their foundations and bases in ethnicity, race and religious affiliation. Within the Christian tradition, and within one single country, such sub-cultures have been a norm in UK, USA and in the Balkans. Having lived for centuries in one common space, these sub-cultures were sometimes mutually cordial and friendly and at others hostile and antagonistic to each other. Their pride in their own sub-culture often lead to looking down on others or at least contemptuously laugh at them. Concoction of jokes against the Irish, Jews, Hungarians and others is a known European phenomenon.

In most of dominant traditional societies people who were even perceptibly different and whose culture and practices varied, were considered alien, and sometimes even intruders though their faith was not essentially different from the original population of that land. This feeling becomes more obvious when basic difference exist in faith such as in the case of Northern Ireland between the Protestants and Catholics. Nevertheless, the issues facing the Muslims in the west have certain unique dimensions.

The profile of Muslims in the west is not monolithic. They are mostly young, working class, skilled as well as unskilled, highly qualified professionals such as medical doctors, engineers, educationists, businessmen and civil servants. A good number of them come from the former colonies of the European imperialist powers such as France, Britain, Portugal, Netherlands and Italy. They are not total strangers to the west nor is the west an unknown entity to the Muslim emigrants. Many of them speak, besides their native language, the language of their former colonizer more or less as fluently as the colonizer. An obvious example is that of North African Muslim emigrants to France. Yet several challenges remain centrally important to them. Should they integrate, isolate themselves, assimilate or return to the countries of their origin once their children are grown and their financial goals are met?

Most of the papers highlight the above aspects including clash of values (for example, Theodore Pulcini, “Values conflict Among American Muslim Youth”), which leads to issues that relate with impact of public education, observance of dress code and dietary regulations, co-education as well the public role of religion. Muhammad Anwar’s article on “Muslims in Britain” while making a sociological analysis of the community informs the readers about the performance level of Bangladeshi, Turk and Pakistani students in their high school education. He notices racial discrimination in the
educational institutions despite the claims of being a multicultural society (pp. 41 and 43). The result of a widening cultural gap between Muslim students and others sometimes leads to retaliation from Muslim students particularly when they are attacked by others (p. 48). Muslims also feel that their values and socio-cultural needs are disregarded by the British institutions and law (p. 49).

Muslims in Germany present a slightly different situation. While elderly emigrants, skilled as well as unskilled, show a ghetto tendency, the youth appear to mix with the majority culture. Unlike their US or Canadian counterparts, the Muslims in Germany have a strong religious commitment (p. 77). Nevertheless, German media and text books also do not depict a good image of Islam and Muslims. This does not help in reducing of the existing gap between the Muslims and the west (p. 76).

“Muslims in Netherlands” by Martin Custes touches on a very interesting problem namely Virzuiling phenomenon i.e., Netherlands as a compartmentalized society. In its historic content, socially and culturally, a thin presence of the Muslims should not be a threat to the existing system. Yet the treatment meted out at social and cultural level has been discriminatory (p. 89). Sardar’s general observations carry element of truth in this respect “Thus a French woman with a scarf is chic, but a Muslim women with a scarf is a threat to civilization.” The very “noise and smell of Muslims,” as Jacques Chirac once declared, drives decent and civilized French people “understandably crazy” (p. 5). According to some scholars, European racism appears to be a major cause behind the persecution of Islam and Muslims.1

In the Canadian situation the cultural gap is further reflected in the job market. “The differences in unemployment rates between Muslims and non-Muslims are not explained by economic and demographic factors alone. Studies of ethnic groups point to certain degree of discrimination” (p. 157). Discrimination at workplace can better be resolved through a change in public policy. One may expect that with passage of time, the second and third generations of emigrants are likely to face less discrimination due to a natural process of socialization. However, more serious challenge faced by the Muslim community in the US comes from the public school system. It has a potential to homogenize youth coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Early Muslim communities such as in Detroit area consequently faced an identity crisis reflected in switching of names from Muhammad to Mike, Fatima to Tina, Hasan to Sonny, Iman to Amy, Hameedullah to Henry, Khalid to Cal and Aliya to Ellen (see, p. 181).

There are no ready-made or shortcut solutions to the challenges faced by Muslim communities being in a dominant different culture. Any and every solution may have its benefits and sensitivities. However, the institutionalization of a parallel holistic education system is one viable and acceptable remedy. In the US within the Christian and Jewish communities parochial education system is a known phenomenon. But other socio-cultural and religious measures are equally needed for sustaining a pluralistic society.

Needless to say that Muslims, living in the west, admire freedom of speech, democracy and individual liberty as supposed to exist in the west. Public policy of certain western countries, however, when it runs against their own ideals does frustrate and disappoint Muslims. They notice, like their non-Muslim neighbours in the country of their choice, blatant violation of civil liberties and disregard of the cultural and religious rights of second and third generation Muslims living in the west. In this context, wearing of scarf by Muslim women is not a minor issue. It symbolizes the attitude of the predominant culture toward the sub-cultures. It exposes the hollowness of pluralism, cultural and religious liberty and equal opportunity claimed by the west.

A meaningful co-existence and a tolerant, peaceful and enlightened society can be created through mutual engagement and respect for differences in worldviews. Assimilation, alienation, integration or emigration alone cannot solve the problem. Bridging the gap through an ongoing interaction, removal of misgivings, confidence building through change of attitude, significant modification in civil policies and respect for religious and cultural rights of the Muslims can, in due course, lead to a true pluralistic society in the west.

Anis Ahmad


*Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe* by H.T. Norris is one of those works of historiographic description, so common nowadays, that are remorselessly detailed and unendurably dull. The book has nine chapters and a conclusion,