

## Diversity and multiculturalism in Europe

**ATLE HETLAND**  
EN ROUTE

**R**ecently I attended a seminar about migration issues at the Institute of Policy Studies, IPS, in Islamabad. Several of the speakers distinguished between multiculturalism and diversity. They seemed to agree with the German Leader Angela Merkel and the British PM David Cameron, who both have said that multiculturalism has failed. There is less integration between foreign immigrants and the locals than they had hoped for, and there are even sometimes conflicts between immigrant groups and indigenous groups. They may be of different class background, religion, skin-colour, or have other differences. But most of the time when they hold demonstrations and debate because they want better jobs, or jobs at all, and improvements in other fields, they just want a greater share of the common resources and more inclusion. Many of those who ‘stand on the barricades’ are frustrated and disappointed with their new homelands; they offer their participation, not only to get more, but also to give more. That should be taken positively.

The term multiculturalism has been used in Europe to describe the changing cultural composition of the populations. From being relatively homogenous populations with few immigrants in the 1960s, European countries now have people from 50 or 100 different countries, in addition to their old minority groups. In most European capitals, a quarter or a third of the inhabitants comes from foreign countries, and a large proportion comes from developing countries. In addition, many have migrated internally from rural areas and other towns to the capital and other larger cities.

Up to five or six percent of the citizens in the ‘new’ Europe are made up of Muslims. Most are active worshippers, who also argue for the importance of religion in society, and indeed for Islam. The secular European countries and the often sedate churches have had difficulties discussing and including other religions in society. But they would all argue for religious freedom as a human right and defend the rights of any group to worship.

Added should be that this happens at a time when the main religion in Europe, Christianity, is on decline, or at least being less present in people’s everyday life. But I believe that religion is much more present in people’s minds than we think; sometimes, just as a convention and below-the-surface cultural value system. Even in Scandinavia, over three-quarters are members of what is now termed the peoples’ church, which was earlier a state church. (Finland still has two state churches, the large Lutheran Church, and the small Orthodox Church.)

Hence, it is a shallow analysis that concludes that the Nordics have no religion. It is a fact, too, that Muslims help revitalize various faith groups, if discussions are managed well. Such discussions are also important to the Muslims and other relative newcomers. They will have to consider the role of religion in society in general, especially in societies where the overwhelming majority is non-Muslim. Dogma and traditions will be discussed and interpretations adjusted to the society in question.

In Christianity, that has happened to a great extent in recent history, with orthodox and liberal groups debating issues and learning from each other. If they disagree, that is usually done respectfully. We should also remember that most religious debate is within each religion, not between religions. However, in Europe and elsewhere, there is a need for developing a good interfaith dialogue between religions. Since Islam is the largest ‘new religion’ in Europe, it is important that it be included in society in a way that is acceptable to all. That is the responsibility of the majority populations, and it is the responsibility of the minority groups, too.

It is important that Europe encourages cultural and religious diversity, and that common understanding for the principles of the various groups is created. It is not good that religions and sub-groups (and ideological, political and other groups) live separate from each other with little dialogue. A Jew must meet a Muslim; a Christian must talk to a Hindu and a Buddhist, and so on. A capitalist must meet a socialist or communist, and be able to debate diverse ideologies in our modern times. And, not least important, people from different economic classes must not become more separate than they are, in the West and elsewhere, where a high number is long-term unemployed, sinking deep into poverty and social exclusion, while others in antisocial ways reap enormous profits of capitalism. Some, but not all at the bottom are immigrants or belong to ethnic minority groups – and a few will have reached the top of the ladder.

When speakers at the IPS seminar I referred above talked about diversity, they mentioned compartmentalized pockets, where people live in ‘parallel worlds’ with little contact with each other. Some speakers thought that there will be more separate groups of this kind in future. It is possible, but I don’t think it is likely if our political systems work well. It would not be diversity, but segregation, and that is not in anybody’s interest. To the extent that such pockets, even ghettos, exist, and they do, we must soonest integrate them in mainstream society. But it must be done in a multicultural and diverse way, where the larger society and the sub-groups find mutual benefits from integration. Should we say 80 or 90 percent integration, and 10 or 20 percent separateness? In multicultural societies people should be encouraged to be diverse and different – as migrants from other areas within a country should also be. They should be proud of their backgrounds.

For example, a Norwegian who belongs to the Sami group, the country’s indigenous people, should be encouraged and helped to keep his or her language, along with Norwegian, and today also English, and his or her cultural heritage. First of all, the Sami should be respected for who they are. But if they want to emphasize their ‘Norwegian-ness’ instead, that should also be welcomed. The same goes for Pakistani-Norwegians from Gujrat, Afghans from Kandahar, Somalis from Mogadishu, and so on. They have so much to be proud of and they should tell fellow Norwegians about it, and they should say what they appreciate in their new homeland.

When I had lived in East Africa for over fifteen years and took up an international post in Washington in the United States, I found it important to stress that I wasn’t only Norwegian – I was also a bit Kenyan. And now, after a decade’s time in Pakistan, over a period of fourteen-fifteen years, I also mention that when saying who I am. Yes, I have become multicultural.

A couple of days after St. Valentine’s Day, I greeted and joked with a young worker in an outdoor restaurant in Islamabad. I asked him if he had gone home to Kashmir and celebrated there, or what he had done. “Nothing”, he said. “It was just another day. I am a small man”, he added. “I have no money, I have nothing.” And I noticed a slight, disguised sadness in his voice. But luckily, Muhammad Shamriz from Chakoti in Kashmir added, “I have two sons, two and four years. They are my future. I hope they will do well in life, and maybe my uncle who works in Dubai can help them, too.”

It is not only immigrants who live in separate pockets in society. Even in their home countries many groups and classes live entirely different lives, excluded from each others’ worlds. A maid and her children in a wealthy house live in a world with little resemblance to that of her employer’. They may live behind the same main gate but will be worlds apart. In future, we must change the structures that maintain such differences, in Pakistan and in the West. This is the most important task in the years to come.

We have the knowledge and skills to do it, but we may lack the political will, and we may focus on wrong issues. In hindsight, I cannot quite understand why we didn’t seek better and diverse integration of immigrants in Europe. We gained from their labour and skills, but we didn’t really admit that the newcomers enriched the cultures and land they came to, also in religious fields.

We should realize that what has happened until now was often halfhearted. Well, we tried to make immigrants become like the people in the new land in all ways. That was naïve, unrealistic and even wrong. But multiculturalism has not failed in Europe; it hasn’t been tried hard enough. We must hurry to do that and we must hurry to create greater opportunities and equality for all – and we must cherish diversity.

---

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.