

**"ON THE MUSLIM QUESTION"**

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Anne Norton challenges the irrational fear of Muslims, especially in Europe and America. She argues that Islamophobia will be defeated in the end by means of our shared lifestyle. She rejects the thesis of a clash between civilizations. She wonders how Muslims have become objects of fear and dread, and how this fear has developed to affect everyone.

Dr. Anne Norton is a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania. She was educated at the University of Chicago, where she received a Ph.D. in political science. She is the author of the *Republic of Signs* (1993), *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (2004), *95 Theses on Politics, Culture & Method* (2004).

Her new book, *On the Muslim Question*, deliberately adopted a title from the nineteenth century. She believes that just as the "Jewish question" was central to the debate on enlightenment in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the pertinent political question now is the "Islamic question", as well as questions pertaining to "Western morality and politics, political theology, and philosophy." the form of interactions between the West and Islam, and "the value of Western civilization", which Norton believes are the same issues the surrounded the Jewish question.

The contents of this book include an introduction by Ruth O'Brien - editor of the *Public Square* series - , which published the book – and another introduction regarding the Islamic issue: philosophy, politics.

The first part - which addresses the Muslim question – is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is entitled "Freedom of Expression", the second "Sex and Sexuality," the third "Women and War," the fourth "Terrorism," the fifth "Equality," and chapter six "Democracy."

The second part addresses the Western Street and consists of four chapters. The seventh chapter is entitled "Where is Europe?," the eighth "Islamic Fascism and the burden of the Holocaust," the ninth "In the American Desert ," and chapter ten "There is no Clash of Civilizations."

Norton wrote that the "Muslim question" stretches across continents. It unites politicians, philosophers, and the press and critics. Radio dialogues are aired on the subject of the common concern of the clash of civilizations. Although it seems, thus far, that the popular response in Western democracies is in direct contrast with this trend. On the streets of the West , ordinary work-

ing people - Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, non-believers, and the rest – work together to formulate a common/shared life .

### **Historical Approach**

For a long period, the “Jewish question” was a topic of concern in Western political thought in the post- enlightenment period. Jews were the “other” who cannot be integrated into European society, which questioned the integrity and scope of secular rationality and the theory and practice of modern politics.

Anne Norton says that “Islamic question” originated as a similar concern about the lack of national security, and the threat of the foreign “other”, and the threat to democracy from irrational religious fanatics. Like a modern Jew, Muslims today are “imagined” rather than a reality, “and the resulting distortions is unfair for those ordinary Muslims who live in our midst and beyond our borders.”

She adds, “but the feeling of distortion and injustice, along with the awareness resulting from the European engagement with the Jewish question, which met with poor results, stimulated Norton to investigate how it manifested in the case of the Islamic question.” Norton reviewed the main sources from which the Westerner philosophers and political commentators drew their negative outlook of Islam and its adherents. Such persons advocated Islam and Muslims as the “other” and therefore undesirable. They placed Islam and Muslims face to face in front of the Western civilization to compare and debate the issue of women, terrorism, democracy, and secularism.

Norton felt that in the West, after the attacks of September 11, there is no shortage of loud and militant voices that advocate to Westerners that Islam is a threat to security, values and way of life, and even the existence of the United States and Europe. For better or for worse, the “Muslim question” has become the foremost question of our time. It is a question related to the freedom of expression, terrorism, violence, human rights, women’s dress, sexual activity, and foremost, it is associated to the possibility of democracy.

Surprisingly, in this original work, the author does not define the meaning of fear. Anne Norton demolishes the idea that there is a “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam. She questions, what it the real issue. According to her, it is the West’s commitment to its own ideals of democracy and enlightenment, freedom, equality, and fraternity. In simpler words, the Muslim question is about values not the fear of Islam, but of the Western civilization. Norton believes that the “Muslim question” if there is such a thing, is a question about non-Muslims.

In her transition between the United States and Europe, and between the past and the present, Norton presents a new creative perspective on the differences between the West and Muslims, from the Danish cartoons about

the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to the murder of Theo van Gogh. She studied the arguments of a wide range of thinkers from John Rawls to Slavoj Žižek. She provided vivid examples from the daily lives of ordinary Muslims and non-Muslims who have accepted each other and were able to collectively build a common existence. Ultimately, Norton provides us with a new vision of a democratic life that is richer and more diverse in the West. Her vision offers room for Muslims rather than make them scapegoats for Western fears.

### **Illusions about Islam**

When discussing the issue of democracy, for example, Norton analysed the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who stressed that Islam is the "other than democracy" and that Islam alone among all world cultures "rejects democracy." Dr. Norton suggests that in Islamic history and the writings of major thinkers, and more recently in the Arab Spring uprisings, Muslims pride themselves with the pursuit of freedom. Its denial was among the major factors resulting from Western intervention in the region and its alliance with local authoritarian personalities.

The author says, in dealing with freedom of expression, she considered the Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie, the Danish cartoons, the writings of Theo van Gogh, and the Somali critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She suggests that Muslim protests against Rushdie in the United Kingdom was generally peaceful. She attacked Western commentators and their claim that the defamation of Islam and Muslims is an affirmation of freedom of expression. Norton notes that European journalists "Take pride in attacking minority populations, which have little political power, and are vulnerable to discrimination and constant contempt."

Yes, it is possible for a member of a minority to differ from the defining attributes that define his minority, at least in a wide range of issues such as eating habits, and religious education. The majority can easily label them as "they" in the context of being the majority "we" (by learning our language, and helping them to lower the height of minarets). Or one can try to move the "we" closer to "they," which probably refers to the similarity of history and practice, or the popular belief that "Arab scientists preserved Western texts," in addition to, "We all share in the Abrahamic religions." After having rejected many of the arguments of Western thinkers against Islam, Norton suggests that no explicit attempts at assimilation or tolerance is preferable for them. Rather, a third model is preferable, namely to move the "we" closer to "them."

In reality, it seems that this is what has indeed transpired. Norton talks about "ordinary" non-Muslims who eat falafel, couscous and use Arabic greetings. It is true that some of the issues may be working to resolve itself internally. Once we eliminate the idea of a clash of civilizations from our vocabulary, this will lead to an increase in areas of coexistence and mutual interests that already exist at the local level in Western societies.

### Questioning Observations

Norton has made dozens of successful points in this book. She has made a number of illuminating revelations for the sins of Western racism and arrogance that hides behind the values of the Enlightenment. This book consists of two strengths that clearly highlights its prominence among the crowd of books dealing with Islam and democracy.

First: its insistence on the consideration of past and present Islamic voices such as the medieval philosopher al-Farabi to Sayyid Qutb and Tariq Ramadan who are partners in a dialogue within the Western tradition. Second is the brevity of its address of some of the world's leading philosophers, especially Jacques Derrida, and John Rawls who emphasised the latent dangers of Islam.

Other important points developed by Norton that need to be emphasized is that the comprehensive term "West" ignores the complexity of the European heritage, including the rich non-Christian heritage, in addition to the debt of modern Europe to the contributions of Judaism and Islam. Norton also correctly points out that the widespread and hast criticism of Islam and Muslims is usually born out of ignorance and prejudice. Norton's summaries of the writings of Arab thinkers like al-Farabi, Ibn Khaldun, and Sayyid Qutb in the context of culture are of particularly valuable.

Some of Norton's observations are filled with irony, such as "when the Jews became Americans, the Americans become more Jewish," and "secularists who fear Islam are not afraid of Islam, but the return of religious authority." She frequently claimed, "Islam does not call for Europe's secularism to return to the spectre of religion, and life in the village: the return of the repressed." Norton also highlighted the elusive demand "covering a woman's body is blocking the challenges of capitalism and the commodification of female sexuality." This is a clear picture of the tricks used by the so-called "Islamic issue" as inventory for a range of concerns, and European and American fears, and doubts, rather than being an accurate reflection of Islam or the behaviour of actual Muslims.

*On the Muslim Question* is an extraordinary book characterized with sincerity of emotion, abundance of culture, astute criticism, and an enthusiasm that strongly refutes the "clash of civilizations." It is a work that strongly advocates against and political clowning and stereotypes, which constitute the core of contemporary debates about Muslims in the West.

One of the great strengths of this work is that the author was able to take the reader on a fascinating journey through carefully selected political scenarios, movies, scientific knowledge, clothing, novels, and language, with attention to the different ways that shape the United States and Europe to respond to "the Islamic issue." Norton's book is a defence of Islam, however, by appreciating the outcomes of the issue, one may question if such a defence came too late.

While the heart and mind of Norton are in the right place, her adoption of a highly emotional tone did not deprive the book of its deserved seriousness and sober commentator that attempts to convince through facts and arguments instead of through the approach of insults popularly adopted by many Western commentators .

Norton proposes a concrete alternative vision of democracy in a variety of communities. The book consists of strong arguments, and has a beautiful and graceful style that is both firm and clear. The book concluded by rejecting the clash of civilizations thesis, noting that in large parts of the Western Street live people from different communities in an environment of harmony, with "many of the hybridization and synthesis projects" surrounding us.

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