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Europe and Islam

A treacherous path?

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A pessimist's view of what Islamic immigration may be doing to Europe

Panos



Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West. By Christopher Caldwell. *Doubleday*; 422 pages; \$30. *Allen Lane*; £14.99. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

IN APRIL 1968 Enoch Powell, a Tory cabinet minister, destroyed his political career when he denounced mass immigration as a disaster ("like the Roman", he said, "I seem to see 'the river Tiber foaming with much blood'"). Today Powell's arguments, if not his classical allusions, are becoming dangerously mainstream.

Christopher Caldwell is an American journalist who writes for the liberal *Financial Times* as well as the conservative *Weekly Standard*. He has spent the past decade studying European immigration, travelling widely and reading voraciously in an impressive variety of languages. His controversial new book repeatedly echoes Powell's warnings all those years ago.

Mr Caldwell argues that "Western Europe became a multi-ethnic society in a fit of absence of mind." European policymakers imported people to fill short-term job shortages. But immigrants continued to multiply even as the jobs disappeared: the number of foreign residents in Germany increased from 3m in 1971 to 7.5m in 2000 though the number of foreigners in the workforce did not budge. Today immigrants account for about 10% of the population of most west European countries, and up to 30% in some of Europe's great cities.

Policymakers were even more mistaken about culture than they were about numbers. They assumed that immigrants would quickly adopt the mores of their host societies. But a surprising number of immigrants have proved “unmeltable”.

Mr Caldwell argues that the reason why so many immigrants failed to assimilate can be summed up in a single word: Islam. In the middle of the 20th century there were almost no Muslims in Europe. Today there are 15m-17m, making up about half of all new arrivals in Europe.

For the most part European countries have bent over backwards to accommodate the sensibilities of the newcomers. A French law court has allowed a Muslim man to annul his marriage on the ground that his wife was not a virgin on their wedding night. The British pensions department has a policy of recognising (and giving some benefits to) “additional spouses”.

But European public opinion is tiring of such bending. Mr Caldwell cites a poll that shows that only 19% of Europeans think immigration to be a good thing for their country; 57% think that their country has “too many foreigners”. Such numbers have recently forced politicians to adjust their policies.

Many countries are tightening their immigration laws, shifting to a skills-based immigration system and setting citizenship tests for would-be immigrants. The French have banned girls from wearing veils in schools. British politicians, such as Tony Blair and Jack Straw, have denounced the veil as a symbol of separation. The old welcome-mat seems to have been replaced by a “Love it or leave it” sign.

For Mr Caldwell this is all a matter of too little too late. Europe’s indigenous population is ageing fast, with a quarter of it over 60. Immigrants have large families. Moreover, Europe is no match for Islamic self-confidence: “When an insecure, malleable, relativistic culture meets a culture that is anchored, confident and strengthened by common doctrines, it is generally the former that changes to suit the latter.”

Mr Caldwell’s unremitting pessimism about Europe raises all sorts of questions, both large and small. Are Europeans really as feeble as he asserts? They have discovered that some principles are non-negotiable in their relations with Islam, particularly women’s rights. And is Islam really as self-confident? The willingness of so many Muslims to take offence at any slight—a cartoon here, a novel there—could be a sign of profound cultural anxiety.

Mr Caldwell is also worryingly selective in his use of evidence. He all but ignores the multiple examples of upward mobility and successful integration. He dwells on the fact that many Muslim men feel emasculated by the success of their women without bothering to wonder why so many of the women are successful.

That said, this is an important book as well as a provocative one: the best statement to date of the pessimist’s position on Islamic immigration in Europe. Supporters of liberal policies need to sharpen their arguments if they are to prevent neo-Powellism from sweeping all before it.