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Islam in the European Empires: An Historical Precedent that Matters in Today's Classroom

Eren Tasar, *University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill*

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On November 8, 2016, I watched Ana Navarro telling ABC News that “there is a White America and there is a Brown and Black America, Chinese America, Muslim America.” Muslims, of course, are white, brown, black, Chinese, and many other things as well, so from a historical standpoint it is surely curious, if nothing else, to see how adherents of a major world religion have been squeezed into the “non-White” umbrella of the American racial classification scheme. Navarro’s comments got me thinking about my own research on Islam in the Soviet Union and the question of how large, cosmopolitan, majority non-Muslim societies have resolved the problem of finding a “niche” for Islam.

I see many parallels between the political context of Islam in America today and discussions that took place in the colonial empires in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. America is not an empire. Yet, like the British, French, and Russian empires, the U.S. is cosmopolitan, multiethnic, multifait, and hosts a growing and prominent Muslim minority. The British, French, and Russian empires have a legacy of incorporating and dealing with Muslims that our society should be aware of. This legacy should be especially important to anyone teaching or talking about, the history of the modern Islamic world, anywhere.

On the one hand, the elites of these empires, like many members of the American elite today, were firmly convinced of the inherent fanaticism and insularity of Islam, though they disagreed

vehemently on whether such fanaticism stemmed from Islamic dogma (whatever that might be), or the historical and cultural circumstances of Muslim societies. The fact that these elites were Christian, secular, or some combination of the two, obviously colored their views about Islam, but so did the reality that their geopolitical interests placed them in an adversarial relationship with large swathes of the Islamic world.

On the other hand, there was a vital and compelling need to extend Muslims some sense of belonging in the polity. Across the 19th century, the British, French, and Russians all sought to institutionalize Islam through the patronage of religious scholars, foundations, and shrines, and through various attempts to codify or otherwise make sense of Islamic law. With the right kind of interference, it was hoped, Islam could be civilized into a form that would make it worthy of inclusion and protection in the imperial framework.

Why does this legacy matter in today's college classroom? It is only a small overstatement to say that the current liberal/conservative impasse about Islam is a reiteration of an old colonial debate. Take, for example, the comments of Newt Gingrich who stated that "sharia is incompatible with Western civilization. Modern Muslims who have given up sharia—glad to have them as citizens." It is perhaps fitting that Gingrich has a Ph.D. in history—though I realize I'm giving him too much credit here—because these two sentences are a crude restatement of the old colonial accommodation with Islam: join the imperial polity, but for God's sake, practice the kind of Islam that you can show up to the Club with!

In my classes on 20th-century history, which focus heavily on Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iran, we do not regularly discuss American politics or current events. We do, however, talk a lot about colonialism, and I try to make my students see the past through prisms that are relevant to their own lives. As it turns out, this has been relatively easy when it comes to the relationship between Islam and the state.

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