

## **Liberal Dilemma with Difference: Muslims in a Western Democracy**

**Mollica Dastider**

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is about western liberal democracies' unease with difference.*

*My engagement in this essay is largely with how secular Europe finds it difficult to accommodate Islamic culture in European public space: often represented by its Muslim citizens. Taking a cue from the public debate in Europe that ensued after the angry reaction of the French footballer Zinedine Zidane at the finals of 2006 World Cup football, the paper addresses the notion of 'well integrated children of French Republic'. A concept mostly used in the context of Muslim immigrants in Europe, and in determining whether they are the 'misfits' in a liberal democratic setup, misfits as in those who do not adhere to the tenets of the enlightenment ideals of secularism, democracy and freedom of the individual. The study points out that both the colour blind policy of French republican-secularism and the German anxiety over 'religious Muslim' behaviour in a 'secular German polity', emerge from the common concern of a possible non-Christian religious influence on the cultures of liberalism in Europe.*

*What emerges in this study is that the debate over secular Europe's discomfort with religious Muslims is not an issue confined only to either Europe or Islam, but has wide reaching implications in terms of enlightenment ideals and its universal applicability. The concern reflected in questions such as 'how well integrated the Muslim immigrant workers are with secular republican ideals' or 'how would a religious Muslim behave electorally in a secular German polity' does indicate western democracy's skepticism over non-western practices in relation to state. For it is apparent that the European dilemma, in other words, is the dilemma of the liberal modernity. A rather political outcome of the social movements in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe to re-define relationship between state and society, and between community and the individual under the new categories of nation state, individual freedom, secularism and rule of law. The Liberal dilemma with Difference in effect addresses those dilemmas of modernity in accepting any different social behaviour that does not fall in the purview of Enlightenment rationality. The community life in the east as against the notion of western individualism; and perhaps more importantly the role of religion as everyday faith in infusing moral and ethical norms in the community life are the two broad areas*

*that offer clear contrast to the western political concept and its strict separation between the religious (church) and the non religious (state).*