No Name in the Street: Questioning the Citizenship Narratives of Muslim Minorities in the West

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Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, Muslims living in Western countries have found their loyalties to their states questioned and their collective willingness to integrate into their societies doubted. In the first years following the terrorist attacks, the concerns emanating of Muslim minority communities were often directed at various state security apparatuses. More recently, however, Muslim minority populations have a new narrative to contend with, a shifting border of acceptance that argues that Islam is not only incompatible with democracy but that Muslims in the West constitute a major threat to American and European ways of life. At its most extreme, the narrative heralds a fabulous story that Muslims are on a “stealth jihad,” beholden as they are to an ideology that is adept, perhaps uniquely so, at exploiting liberal notions of tolerance. Thus, acts of cultural expression and the straightforward activities of Muslim daily life now become suspicious on other level beyond impending violence. These include Muslims constructing houses of worship (minaret bans), Muslims dressing according to their traditions (niqab bans) or Muslims seeking public accommodation for their religious practices (cf. the debate over foot baths in public restrooms at the University of Michigan-Dearborn). Muslims, in other words, may be statutory citizens, but their citizenship is often feared since they are purportedly doctrinally predisposed to abuse the privileges of citizenship to usurp the rights of other, more established citizens. Why are Muslim citizenship rights currently being questioned in some Western liberal democracies? This presentation will consider Christopher Caldwell’s Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West and Tariq Ramadan’s Towards a European Islam to argue that what is needed in popular discourse is less talk about Islam and more about Muslim life, including their non-religious experiences, if we wish to understand the value of citizenship.