What place for God in Europe?

Across Europe, the conflicting currents of secularism, Christianity, and Islam are compelling Europeans to wrestle with their values as never before. In this article (originally published as a three-part series), the Monitor examines the forces that are shaping European identity - and explores why the Continent is debating what role, if any, religion should play in public life.

By Peter Ford | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

PARIS – As he urged closer ties with Europe Monday, President Bush played down the current political disputes. "No power on earth will ever divide us," he said.

That may be true when it comes to Iran's nuclear program. But his remark ironically hints at a transatlantic chasm over US and European values, and the role each side assigns to a fundamental facet of human life: religious faith.

Two events last year neatly frame the challenge: In the United States, a California man tried to remove "One Nation, Under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. Americans cried foul - roughly 90 percent wanted to keep the phrase - and on June 15, the Supreme Court halted the bid on procedural grounds.

Three days later, in Brussels, officials agreed on the final text of the European Union's new Constitution. The charter made no mention of God, despite calls that it recognize Europe's Christian roots.

Indeed, its secularism has led to jokes that Europe is one big "blue" state. But Europeans aren't laughing. Buffeted by the crosscurrents of secularism, Christianity, and Islam - and mindful of a history of religious violence - they are wrestling with their values and identity as never before.

"The clash between those who believe and those who don't believe will be a dominant aspect of relations between the US and Europe in the coming years," says Jacques Delors, a former president of the European Commission. "This question of a values gap is being posed more sharply now than at any time in the history of European-US relations since 1945."

Religion's role in public life, and its influence on politics, have been center-stage questions worldwide since Sept. 11, 2001. But the debate in Europe has been complicated by the continent's difficulty in integrating its fast-growing Muslim immigrant minority. It has been sharpened by tragedies such as the bombing of a
Madrid train station last March, and the brutal murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic extremist last fall.

Those incidents "will reinforce secularism" in Europe, predicts Patrick Weil, a sociologist of religion at the Sorbonne in Paris. "The tendency now in Europe is to say we have to be clear on the limits to religious intervention" in public life. "We are not going to sacrifice women's equality, democracy, and individual freedoms on the altar of a new religion."

Secularists who think like that are swimming in friendly waters in Europe, where religious convictions and practice have dropped sharply in recent decades, and where mainstream churches - especially the Catholic Church - continue to lose members and influence.

Today, just 21 percent of Europeans say religion is "very important" to them, according to the most recent European Values Study, which tracks attitudes in 32 European countries. A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that nearly three times as many Americans, 59 percent, called their faith "very important."

Although a Gallup poll found last year that 44 percent of Americans say they attend a place of worship once a week, the average figure in Europe is only 15 percent, although the picture varies widely across the Continent.

**Godless secularism?**

For some Europeans, that slump marks a defeat for moral values at the hands of godless secularism.

"The new soft totalitarianism that is advancing on the left wants to have a state religion," complains Rocco Buttiglione, the Italian politician whose ambition to become the European commissioner for justice was thwarted last year by the European Parliament, which objected to his description of homosexuality as a sin.

"It is an atheist, nihilistic religion - but it is a religion that is obligatory for all," Mr. Buttiglione adds.

Luis Lopez Guerra, the Spanish government's point man in its campaign to wrest from Catholic influence social legislation on questions such as abortion, divorce, and gay marriage, sees things differently.

He wonders why, in a country where less than half the population ever goes to church, he should have found a Bible and a crucifix on his desk, along with the Constitution, when he was sworn in as undersecretary at the Ministry of Justice a year ago.
The Spanish government's plans to legalize gay marriage this spring, to liberalize divorce and abortion laws, and to permit stem-cell research, do not represent an attempt to impose an atheist state religion, he insists. Rather, he says, they "extend civil rights and make the law independent of Catholic dogma.

He adds, "The government has a responsibility to represent the majority of the people. Our policy has to depend on the people's will, not on the preferences of the Catholic church."

Spain is currently the front line in the Vatican's rear-guard battle to retain church influence over public policy in Europe. But with public opinion ranged firmly on the government's side, there seems little it can do but make its displeasure known.

Pope John Paul II lashed out at Madrid recently, accusing authorities of "restriction of religious freedom" and "relegating faith to the private sphere and opposing its public expression."

The changes in Spain, Catholic church leaders worry, are part of a broader trend. Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, recently attacked "a new holy inquisition ... motivated predominantly by prejudice toward all that is Christian."

Other traditional churches have felt the same cold winds. The president of the French Protestant Federation, Jean-Arnold de Clermont, warned Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin last December of a climate of "secularist zeal" that was undermining all faiths.

Such zeal has known peaks and troughs over the centuries, but it is not new to Europe, where political leaders and ordinary citizens experienced religion and felt its weight in ways quite unknown to Americans.

The differences are rooted in the 18th century, when the Enlightenment, the philosophical revolution that laid the foundations of the modern Western world, was interpreted quite differently by Americans and Europeans in one crucial respect.

**Enlightenment divergence**

In Europe, says Grace Davie, an expert on religion at Exeter University in England, "the Enlightenment was seen as freedom from religion ... getting away from dogma, whereas in the [US] it meant freedom to believe."

In America, a country founded in part by religious dissidents fleeing an oppressive government, "religious groups are seen as protecting individuals against the interference of the state," says Mr. Weil.

In Europe, on the other hand, the post-Enlightenment state "is seen as protecting individuals from the intrusion of religious groups," Weil argues, after centuries during
which the official church, be it Catholic or Protestant, had always been closely identified with temporal powers.

While religion and democracy have always been intertwined in America, where churches were at the forefront of battles against slavery and in favor of civil rights, this has by no means been the case in Europe. There, established churches in countries such as Spain and France long opposed political reform.

European mistrust of public religion is heightened even further, however, when it is mixed with patriotism in the kind of rhetoric that President Bush often uses.

"God and patriotism are an explosive mixture," cautions Nicolas Sartorius, an éminence grise of the Spanish left who spent many years in jail during Gen. Francisco Franco's dictatorship. The dictator's guiding ideology, he recalls pointedly, was known as "Catholic nationalism."

After a tortured, centuries-long history of wars fought over religion, in whose name millions died, Europeans are deeply skeptical today of patriotic exhortations infused with religious meaning, says Karsten Voigt, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's adviser on relations with Washington.

And nowhere is this truer than in Germany, he adds. "The mixture of patriotism and religion is anathema and heresy in German religious life because it was misused and went too far in the past," Mr. Voigt explains. "Remember, German soldiers in World War I wore belt buckles reading 'Gott Mitt Uns' [God With Us]."

Dominique Moisi, one of France's most respected political analysts, agrees. Viewed from this side of the Atlantic, "the combination of religion and nationalism in America is frightening," he says. "We feel betrayed by God and by nationalism, which is why we are building the European Union as a barrier to religious warfare."

How values affect policy

EU members have gone further than any other group of nations in pooling their national sovereignty in the interests of collective security. It's a concept completely foreign to the US, where Bush has repeatedly insisted that he will do whatever he sees fit to protect Americans.

That divergence "is a matter of principle, a matter of values," says Martin Ortega, an analyst at the EU's Institute for Security Studies in Paris. "Europe's history has led Europeans to a more cosmopolitan worldview, which tries to understand 'the other,' " he suggests.

One of the implications of this approach, Mr. Ortega argues, is that a ban on the use of force except in extreme circumstances has become a European value, just like its corollary: reliance on international law.
That, too, sets Europe apart from America in a fundamental way when it comes to coping with world crises.

The differences were stark over the war in Iraq. They persist with regard to Iran, where Europe's three largest nations are pursuing diplomatic efforts to prevent Iran from enriching uranium - efforts the US has refused to join.

The values gap is evident in Washington's wariness of multilateral approaches to world affairs: The US has rejected the Kyoto treaty, designed to slow global warming, which came into force last week, while the EU embraced it. And Europe supports the International Criminal Court, which the US opposes.

Some European leaders, eager to mend diplomatic fences with the US, fear that such different perspectives could tempt Washington to dismiss Europe as an unreliable ally.

"In some segments of conservative US opinion, anti-European feeling is on the rise," worries Mr. Voigt. "They see us as soft on terrorism, or as simply immoral."

On the contrary, retorts Ortega, who describes himself as a Catholic believer, "I interpret my religion in a more modern, humane, and universal manner. I find the American manner quite antiquated. For example, I'm sure that when President Bush applied the death penalty in Texas, or decided to use force in Iraq, he felt it compatible with his religious beliefs."

In fact, the fundamental values that Europe and the US proclaim are almost identical.

Few Americans would quibble over the proposed EU Constitution's declaration that "the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights." It goes on to promote "tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men."

**Philosophical differences**

These shared sentiments, however, flow from different metaphysical head waters. In his inaugural address last month, Bush founded his commitment to human rights on the belief "that every man and woman on this earth ... bear[s] the image of the Maker of Heaven and Earth."

That thinking does not sit well in Europe, where human rights are rooted in a tradition of secular humanism, which holds that mankind is capable of ethical conduct and self-fulfillment without recourse to the supernatural.

In Europe, secularism is not understood as necessarily hostile to religion. In France, the term denotes a level playing field, on which the state allows all religions to operate freely, but stands aside. Elsewhere, it means an indifference to faith. More generally,
secularism refers to an approach to life grounded not in religious morality but in human reason and universal ethics.

At the same time, European governments have chosen to adopt a broader set of moral values in setting their foreign policy than they see apparent in US policy, which to them often seems wholly focused on "the war on terror."

That leads them to attach more importance to issues such as the environment and poverty, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac stressed in speeches to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, earlier this month.

Though the broad moral values at the foundations of public policy in Europe draw clearly on Christian inspiration, the established churches are equally clearly losing their grip on social attitudes to personal moral questions.

A look at the dramatic fall in birthrates all over Europe reveals how faithfully couples are following Catholic teaching on contraception. And as religion's importance fades in people's lives, their permissiveness increases, the European Values Study found.

For example, of the 10 countries where religion is most important to people's lives, eight are among the 10 least tolerant of euthanasia. An increasing number of European governments are following Britain's lead in legalizing stem-cell research, with public support, despite opposition from Catholic leaders.

But even if churches are emptying across Europe, and citizens are reluctant to imbue policy with religious significance, that hardly makes the Continent atheist, pollsters and religious leaders say.

Rather, suggests Archbishop John Foley, the US head of the Vatican's Council for Social Communications, "many people in Europe consider it poor taste to mention your beliefs. It is perceived as rendering other people uncomfortable."

While only 41 percent of Europeans say they believe in a personal God, another 33 percent believe in a spirit, or life force.

It is on that reservoir of spirituality that religious leaders of several faiths hope to draw, in order to bring religion back from the margins of public life in Europe. And they are finding encouragement from some unlikely sources.

In France, perhaps the most militantly secular society in Europe, and which this year celebrates the 100th anniversary of a law separating church and state, one of the men most likely to succeed Jacques Chirac as president broke a strict political taboo late last year.

In a book-length series of interviews entitled "The Republic and Religion: Hope," Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of the ruling conservative Union for a Popular
Movement, broached controversial subjects such as state funding for religious institutions.

He was motivated by a feeling that would be banal in the US, but which for a French political leader is almost revolutionary: "That the religious phenomenon is more important than people think, that it can contribute to peace, to balance, to integration, to unity and dialogue," he wrote. "The Republic should debate this, and reflect on it."

**In a secular ocean, waves of spirituality**

Religion has barged its way noisily and violently onto the European political stage in recent months.

Islamic radicals set bombs on commuter trains in Madrid that killed 191 people last March. Another extremist Muslim in Amsterdam is charged with brutally killing Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November. An angry mob of British Sikhs, throwing bricks and wrestling with police, stormed a theater in Birmingham last December, forcing the closure of a play they found offensive.

But in the shadow of such shocking events are signs of a quieter and less divisive return of religion and spirituality to European lives. "God is back among intellectuals," says Aleksander Smolar, a leading European thinker who heads the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw and teaches at the Sorbonne in Paris. "You can feel there is a problem of soul in Europe; people are conscious of a void and there is a certain crisis of secularism."

Seeking to fill that void, several dozen faithful Catholics gathered one recent Tuesday evening, as they do each week, to pray in the freshly painted basement of the St. Denys church in northern Paris.

One after another, standing in a circle, they gave thanks aloud to God: one woman was grateful that an argument with her son had not gotten out of hand; another prayed for continued strength to keep looking for a job; a third, in tears, thanked the Lord "for helping me put up with all the humiliation I suffer."

And then they all sang a simple hymn. Some swayed; some held their palms outstretched; others closed their eyes.

For the past nine years, the parish of St. Denys has been run by a priest from the "New Path Community," a charismatic Catholic movement that has borrowed much from the American Pentecostal tradition.

While the pews in traditional Catholic churches have emptied, the New Path and similar communities have blossomed, attracting thousands of believers to prayer groups and Sunday masses across Europe.
They are drawn, says parish priest Louis-Marc Thomy, "by the charisma of a community life. They say they feel unity and peace with us. And they find joy in rediscovering faith in a joyous manner."

On the face of it, religion has continued to suffer setbacks in Europe recently. Just last year, the French government reinforced its secular approach by banning Muslim head scarves and other religious symbols from schools.

Catholic teaching on such questions as abortion, contraception, divorce, and homosexuality, meanwhile, is honored more in the breach than in the observance.

That would seem to continue a secularist trend visible in Europe for several decades. That trend is offset, however, by a growing awareness that European secularism is an aberration in a world where religion is largely on the rise.

The prominent role that religion continues to play in American public life, meanwhile, has undermined the widespread European view that modern societies inevitably grow more secular, and that religion is an attribute of underdevelopment.

"A preoccupation with spirituality is much more present now at a religious and philosophical level" than it was a few years ago, says Dominique Moisi, a French political analyst.

**Growing interest in spirituality**

In Britain, the country's largest bookseller has noticed that preoccupation, and moved to meet it. Expanding the shelf space it devotes to religious and spiritual books, "we have increased our range over the last few years," says Lucy Avery, a spokeswoman for the Waterstone's chain.

Sales of such books rose by nearly 4 percent last year, she adds, and titles such as the Dalai Lama's "The Art of Happiness" and a modern-language "Street Bible" have become bestsellers.

"I have noticed that a lot of general-interest publishers are turning to religious books now for commercial reasons, because that is what the public wants," says Laurence Vandamme, a spokeswoman for Cerf, the largest French religious publisher.

In France, leading philosopher Régis Debray, once a comrade in arms of Che Guevara in the Bolivian mountains, has devoted two of his most recent books to explorations of God and religion. Le Monde, the French establishment's newspaper of record, this year launched a glossy bimonthly "World of Religion."

"The need for meaning affects the secularized and de-ideologized West most of all," wrote Frédéric Lenoir, the editor of the new magazine, in his first editorial. "Ultramodern individuals mistrust religious institutions ... and they no longer believe
in the radiant tomorrow promised by science and politics; they are still confronted, though, by the big questions about origins, suffering, and death."

Rocco Buttiglione, a confidant of the pope who was denied a bid to join the European Commission last year because of his staunch Catholic views on social issues, has a ready answer to such questions. "For a long time they told us that science and maths would give us the identity we need," he says. "Both failed. Now when Europeans ask themselves 'Who are we?' they don't have an answer. I suggest we are Christians."

That opinion is not widely shared. Critics point to the millions of immigrant Muslim Europeans living in France, Germany, Britain, and Spain, not to mention Europe's indigenous Muslims in the Balkans.

Nor are there many signs of a resurgence of organized religion on a continent where church attendance has been plummeting almost everywhere in recent decades.

Yet 74 percent of Europeans say they believe in a God, a spirit, or a life force, according to the latest findings of the European Values Study, a 30-year, Continent-wide survey. And youth workers in Britain are finding "consistent evidence ... that a secular generation is being replaced by a generation much more interested in spiritual issues," says Stuart Murray-Williams, a theologian at Oxford University who recently published a book entitled "After Christendom."

A wide array of religious groups has sprung up across Europe to meet that generation's needs, most notably Buddhist communities.

"I've noticed a steady increase in interest," says Suvannavira, a Russian-born, British-educated monk who runs the Western Buddhist Order's Paris outpost in a cramped storefront meditation center. "Our order has doubled in size since 1990."

"The discourse has changed," Dr. Murray-Williams says. "Ten or 15 years ago, any mention of spiritual experiences would have drawn blank looks. Today people are hungry to talk about them." Murray-Williams says it's too soon to say what all this portends.

"There is a kind of inchoate spirituality that could be significant, or it could be a passing trend," he says. "It will be a while before we know whether or not it is strong enough to challenge the culture of secularism."

That culture is showing signs of wear, argues Jacques Delors, who once bemoaned Europe's lack of "soul" when he was president of the European Commission. "I fear that the construction of Europe is sinking into absolute materialism," he worries. "Things aren't going well for society, so society is little by little going to start asking itself what life is for, what death is, and what happens afterwards."

Some European politicians are picking up on that message. One with a particularly keen nose for the way the political wind is blowing is Nicolas Sarkozy, head of
Jacques Chirac's conservative ruling party in France and a leading contender to be the country's next president.

"Politicians should not talk only about the economy, about social affairs, about the environment or security. We should also tackle spiritual questions," he said in a series of interviews published last November as a book, which has already sold 65,000 copies. "Religion's place in France at the beginning of the third millennium is central."

Suggesting that the state should subsidize churches and mosques - a radical break from the country's 100-year-old secular tradition - Mr. Sarkozy insists that he will "continue to argue for a new relationship between religions and the public authorities."

Sarkozy's novel approach, says Mr. Moisi, is based on "a sense that while for some, religion is the problem, it can also be part of the solution. He is bringing a kind of oxygen to the debate."

Mr. Buttiglione is bringing his own oxygen into that debate, devoting his time now to setting up a think tank and a popular movement to promote his beliefs. Traveling around most of Europe, he says, he has found "enormous interest" in his campaign "for a Christian presence in European politics."

The Vatican has launched itself actively into the fray as well, sending teams from Rome to rally the Spanish faithful against Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's plans to legalize gay marriage, speaking out loudly in favor of Mr. Buttiglione, and lobbying hard for a reference to God in the European Constitution. [Editor's note: The original version of this article misstated the prime minister's title.]

Though the Catholic church lost that battle, it can take some consolation from Article 52 of the proposed Constitution, concerning the European Union's relationship with churches. "Recognizing their identity and their specific contribution," the article reads, "the Union shall maintain an open, transparent, and regular dialogue with these churches and organizations."

**Cause for union**

There is considerable scope, some religious leaders suggest, for those churches to unite in a bid to inject their common values into public life. After all, mainstream Christians, Jews, and Muslims share many views on family matters, and the sanctity of human life.

Indeed, some observers wonder whether the most significant "clash of civilizations" in Europe may pit, not Christians against Muslims, but believers of all faiths against nonbelievers.

There have been signs of such a development in recent months. The Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, stood up for Muslims against the government's
school ban on head scarves last year, for example, branding it an assault on religious freedom.

Similarly, both the Protestant and Catholic prelates in the English city of Birmingham showed understanding toward Sikhs who disrupted a theatrical performance last December.

The Sikhs were angered by the way the play, "Dishonour," written by a Sikh woman, included scenes of beatings, rape, and murder in a Sikh temple.

Several hundred of them stormed the Birmingham Repertory Theatre last December, causing management to halt the show and cancel all further performances for fear of unrest.

"Such a deliberate, even if fictional, violation of the sacred place of the Sikh religion demeans the sacred place of every religion," Vincent Nichols, the Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham wrote in a statement. "People of all faiths, therefore, will be offended."

It is unclear how many people were offended, because the rise in spirituality has not translated into growing support for organized churches, mosques or temples. Indeed, says Murray-Williams, the violence that has accompanied the eruption of religion into European public life "may exacerbate the difference between religion and spirituality.

"Many people see spirituality as something positive, while religion is seen as a system that can be divisive," he says.

But the signs are there, says Mr. Delors, to suggest that religious sentiment may yet take firmer hold in European life. "I don't expect a wholesale social mutation," he says. "But I can see little white stones marking out a path."

**Europe's rising class of believers: Muslims**

As the three young North African women talked about their Muslim faith at a cafe here one recent evening, they could not help noticing how patrons at the next table were reacting.

One French man leaned so far back in his chair to hear the animated discussion that he almost joined the group.Suspicion and disapproval darkened his look.

Nadia Mirad, a psychology student who works at a children's activity center, knows that look. Last year, she recalled, when she asked for a day off to celebrate the end of the annual Ramadan fast, her boss exploded.

"She said I was being unprofessional," Ms. Mirad explained, sipping a Coke. "She said the world didn't stop turning just for a Muslim holiday. I'm French, but I felt I was not a full French citizen at that moment. I really did not feel at home."
Her two student friends, both of them also born and raised in France, nodded in sympathy. "We feel as French as France will let us feel," said Bouthaina Gargouri. "But it's true, I can't live my religion fully here."

None of them, for example, wears a head scarf, though they all say they would like to do so one day. Making such a visible show of their religion, however, would make it almost impossible for them to get a job, they agreed.

"I can't afford to put up barriers to what I want to be," said Leïla Bousteïla, who hopes to become an interpreter for deaf mutes.

Religion's place in public life has shot to the top of the agenda in France, and in the rest of Europe, for one reason: Islam, and the growing millions of people on the Continent who practice it.

Shocked by the discovery of Islamic terrorist networks on their soil, Europeans have suddenly woken up to the existence of an often marginalized Muslim minority that takes religion more seriously than they do.

Today, the relationship between native Europeans and their Muslim neighbors is fraught with tension. Mistrust on both sides threatens to explode into violence. Late last year, arsonists destroyed two mosques and a Muslim school in the Netherlands after an Islamic radical there was arrested for murdering filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who had criticized Muslim treatment of women.

Particularly unnerving are the violent messages spread by a number of radical Muslim preachers. "I believe the whole of Britain has become Dar ul Harb [land of war]," Syrian-born cleric Omar Bakri Mohammed told followers in a webcast on "PalTalk" last month. "The jihad is halal [acceptable] for the Muslims wherever they are." [Editor's note: The original version of this article mistranslated Dar ul Harb.]

"Active Christians in mainstream churches across the Continent are worried by the rise in fundamentalist nationalism," says Jorgen Nielsen, a professor of Islamic studies at Birmingham University in England.

"Secularists tend to be more worried not just about Islam but the return of religion to the public space," he adds.

Europe's Muslim population has tripled in the past 30 years, fueled by immigration from North Africa, Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This rapid growth "questions our ... ability to integrate" them, warns Patrick Weil, a French sociologist.

"This is the first time for a long time ... that we have had to show that we can adapt and accept religious diversity," he adds. "That is a challenge."
At the same time, acknowledges Tariq Ramadan, one of the foremost Islamic thinkers in Europe, Muslims must change their thinking on many customs that alienate Europeans, such as their attitudes about women. "From Arab Islam, or African Islam, we have to come to European Islam," he argues.

Arguments over how to integrate Muslims into modern European life, and how much Islam Europe can accept without betraying its values, have been tainted by the link to terror. Governments have reacted by tightening controls on Muslim preachers, many of whom do not speak the language of their adopted country. Britain has introduced civics tests for imams. French authorities are planning to set up a school that would also send preachers in training to secular universities. And in Denmark, the right-wing People's Party, a government coalition member, urges a ban on all foreign imams.

Such moves have won support even in some Muslim quarters. "It is not xenophobic for Europeans to be genuinely worried about the radicalization of Islam," says Tim Winter, a British Muslim convert who teaches at Cambridge University and preaches at a mosque. "But it is not acceptable to say that Islam cannot adapt to European life."

Being religious at all, however, is unusual in European life. Though Muslims make up only 3 percent of the British population, more people attend Friday prayers than go to Sunday church, a recent survey found.

That scares many Europeans who fear that Europe could soon lose its Christian identity. The prospect of Turkey joining the European Union (EU) in 10 years’ time, which would add an expected 83 million Muslims, deepens their fear.

"Europe is becoming Islamicized," warned Fritz Bolkestein a few weeks before he left his job as the EU’s competition commissioner last December, noting that the two biggest cities in his native Netherlands, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, will be minority European within a few years.

That sounds like scaremongering to some Islamic leaders, who note that less than 5 percent of Europe’s population is Muslim. To others, it sounds like a call to abandon their faith.

"Many European politicians, as well as average people, are prone to thinking that the only safe Muslims are those who neither practice their religion nor manifest their Muslim identity," wrote Mr. Ramadan in his book, "To Be a European Muslim."

Ramadan is the leading proponent of "European Islam," a school of thought intended to meet the needs of descendants of immigrants who have few ties to their ancestral cultures.

Last spring, Time magazine named him one of the 21st century’s most influential people. But last summer, the US Department of Homeland Security controversially revoked his visa days before he was to begin teaching at the University of Notre
Dame, in Indiana. A department official said Ramadan had been barred in accordance with a provision of the Patriot Act.

Ramadan insists that many of the habits Muslims display and that Europeans revile are not Islamic per se, but rather cultural traits specific to the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. "Muslims living in Europe have an opportunity to reread our [religious] sources," he says.

"We are going through a reassessment," he adds, "and the most important subject is women. Our experience in Europe has made it clear we must speak about equality."

"Europeanizing" Islam, says Professor Nielsen, whose home town, Birmingham, is known as the "Muslim capital of Britain," "requires changes in relations between the sexes, in relations between parents and children, significant changes in attitudes to people of other religions, and in attitudes toward the state."

That is happening, Nielsen says. A few Muslims are assimilating completely with secular European culture, "but the majority are sticking to their religion but divorcing it from the cultural tradition and redressing it in a new culture."

At the same time, a small minority has turned toward a hard-line version of their religion, and a handful have taken up jihad, or holy war against the West. Police in several European countries have arrested hundreds of young Muslim men in connection with alleged terrorist plots since 9/11.

In Britain, Scotland Yard is investigating Mr. Bakri Mohammed after reporters heard him proclaiming that "death will be inevitable ... if people reject the call of mighty Allah" at a secret rally in London in January.

"There is a struggle for the soul of Islam," says Dr. Winter, also known as Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad. Even as young European Muslims seek new ways of living their religion, "Gulf embassies ... spend tens of millions of pounds to ensure that the most fundamentalist form of Islam prevails in schools and bookshops," he laments. "Liberal Islam - economically, culturally, and socially - is crying in the wilderness."

The stronger fundamentalist Islam grows, the harder it will be for most Muslims to integrate, Ramadan says. "It is important for us as Muslims to be unambiguous that we respect the law and the secular framework," he insists.

On the other hand, he adds, Europeans "must start considering Islam as a European religion, and stop building a European identity against Islam as something external."

That will not be easy, given the secular European tradition of keeping religion out of the public space for fear that it might undermine democracy, a tradition developed in the face of an often reactionary Roman Catholic Church. It will be harder in the case of an unfamiliar religion often preached in a foreign tongue.
But Islamic thinkers hope that they can persuade Europeans that Islam has something to offer. "We are accused of encouraging the return of religious people to the public sphere," says Ramadan. "The question is whether we are ... contributing to society with concerns about values and ethics."

"If Islam cannot sit comfortably within the liberal European mainstream," says Winter, "it will raise the question whether Europe ... can accept substantial differences" among its citizens.

Back in the Paris cafe, Ms. Gargouri and her friends say it would not take much to make them feel more comfortable as European Muslims. For a start, suggests Gargouri, "people must stop confusing Islam with Islamism and even with terrorism. Islam was here long before 9/11."

Ms. Bousteïla agrees. "It would help," she says, "if I did not have a label stuck on me wherever I show up."

- Sophie Arie in Rome and Mark Rice-Oxley in London contributed to this report.