

**MUSLIMS IN GERMANY:
The Struggle for Integration**

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“We asked for workers, and we got human beings.” Nobody today remembers who said this sentence for the first time, but everybody agrees that it explains better than anything else the origin of Germany's Muslim minority, even though nobody thought about it at first. Industrialists and politicians were importing labor in the 1960s. Nobody at that time was prepared for the arrival of real people with real needs. No one thought much about the consequences of transplanting people from one culture into another. And not much attention was given to the fact that a large segment of the foreign “guest workers” was Muslim.

NINETEEN SIXTY-ONE IN GERMANY

The economy was booming: about 500.000 job vacancies are registered, and only about 180.000 Germans are registered as unemployed. Importing foreign labor seemed to be the easiest way out of the labor shortage. At first only an initiative by German industry, the plan to import labor was soon sanctioned by the federal government by mutual agreements with foreign governments to recruit workers in their respective countries. Recruitment treaties were signed with Italy, Greece, Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia.

There was not much concern with the needs of and facts about these guest workers. Since they had come to work and were supposed to stay only for a short while, it seemed acceptable for them to live in dormitories and over-expensive rooms of apartments turned into hostels. “They are only here to save money for back home anyway,” was the general opinion. Certainly no one was aware that this was the beginning of a Muslim community in Germany.¹ It was noticed that the guest workers from Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia had different religious and dietary

¹ It must be mentioned that there have been small groups of Muslims living in Germany for the past several centuries. Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I was the first “importer” of Muslims, when in 1731 he incorporated 20 Turkish soldiers into his army.)

habits, but in the 1960s Islam was not an issue: It was the early Kennedy years: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Berlin Wall. The only other international conflict worth arguing for or against was Viet Nam. The Middle East was a question of Israel versus the Arabs. At that time the problem was identified as "Palestinian terrorism"; the phrase "Islamic terrorism" had not entered our vocabulary. In Iran the Shah was ruling in splendor. The renaissance of Islamic movements was far in the future. As a consequence, the Muslim guest workers were left essentially to themselves.

THE END OF RECRUITMENT; THE BEGINNING OF "FAMILY JOINING"

By November 1973, however, the economic picture had changed. The federal German government began to fear the arrival of a recession due to increases in oil prices. They therefore decided to stop recruiting foreign workers from outside the European Community. By that time over 900.000 Turks were living in Germany. The government hoped not only to stop the influx of non-European workers but also to stem the growth of the community already established. However this attempt was not successful for two reasons: There was a change from the original policy of rotation whereby workers were only allowed short stays in Germany, and then sent home and replaced with a new crop of workers. Industry soon had found it was not profitable to send back workers who had just been trained in the requisite skills. More importantly, workers had found that a short time in Germany was not enough to earn the money needed to establish economic independence in their home countries. Therefore, they exercised rights they had been granted under a number of international agreements already in place, according to which the workers could bring their families to join them in their countries of employment. Thus, between 1973 and 1980 there was a constant influx of family members, increasing the Muslim foreign worker community population. In 1980 alone the number of new arrivals was 212.000.

In another effort to ease the pressure on the German labor market, the government of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which came to power in October 1982, passed a law to supply financial benefits for those workers who wanted to go back home. Some took the opportunity to leave. Furthermore, there was a slowdown in immigration; in 1983 and 1984 there were only about 42.000 new arrivals. Still the total Turkish population stayed at about 1,5 Million. In recent years it has grown to over 1,9 Million.

CURRENT POPULATION

Today in 1996 there are no precise figures reflecting the total size of the Muslim community. However, there is general agreement that the current Muslim population of Germany is around 2.2 million: In addition to the Turks, the largest portion of that population, this community is made up primarily of people from the Maghreb (North Africa), and Yugoslavia. A much smaller group are those Muslims who come officially to Germany to study. There are also those who come as refugees from their home countries: Muslims from Syria, for example, who fled the regime of Hafez al-Asad; and Muslims from Iran fleeing the political system there. Included among other Muslims from Algeria is a recent wave of refugees who supported the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), also seeking political asylum in Germany.

Still another component of Germany's Muslim population are ethnic Germans, who have accepted Islam as a matter free choice. Here again figures are not very precise, and estimates range from 100.000 to 200.000, the truth being most probably in the middle somewhere. Many of them take this choice because they marry a Muslim. But there also is a small but constant flow of people who say the *shahada* (prayer asserting acceptance of the essential teachings of Islam), simply out of personal conviction.² To the traditional German population, which is deeply rooted in Christian tradition and does not readily take to "the exotic", this phenomenon

² I do not use the terms "convert" or „become Muslim“ generally because of the Muslim teaching that all people are born Muslim in nature (*fitrah*); only the parents educate their children in different beliefs.

is difficult to accept. This is especially the case if the people who “become Muslim” are visible in public because of positions in government administration and/or politics. In such cases the reaction can be quite fierce.

Since the author of this chapter is one of those German Muslims not only whose life changed religiously but who has been subject to threats of all kinds and whose career took a decisive turn in a new direction, some details may be of interest here.

CHANGING DIRECTIONS

After sixteen years of active political engagement in the Christian Democratic Union, including a variety of chairmanships at different levels, and in my fifth year as the head of the group of journalistic services for the public relations and campaign staff of the federal headquarters of Helmut Kohl’s party, I said the shahada in 1989. It was a private religious decision based on three issues: First I appreciated the fact that Islam does not know the concept of original sin, which had alienated me from the Protestant religion in which I was raised. Secondly I fully accepted the absolutely monotheistic message of Islam, rejecting the concept of the Holy Trinity and Jesus as the son of God. In addition, I liked the fact that Islam does not have an institutionalized church. Except for my parents, my boss, my secretary, and a few “good friends” - one too many as it turned out - I told no one of my decision.

Three days after my election to the office of press spokesperson for the CDU in the city of Bonn in 1990, anonymous letters told the daily papers of Bonn that the new spokesperson was a Muslim. They went on to claim that this fact had been kept from the members of the party deliberately, and that the new office should be taken from Hoffmann. Indeed they demanded that he be expelled from the CDU. Fortunately, the journalists agreed not to publish these anonymous messages.

In 1992, in cooperation with the Jeddah-based International Islamic Relief Organization ("Igatha"), - I organized the first of a number of trips for journalists to Zagreb and Split to inform them about what was going on in the former Yugoslavia. That summer I made my first public statement as a Muslim. This was followed soon after by an appearance on one of the most widely watched national television talk shows, where I had twenty minutes out of an hour to talk about the message of Islam and the changes it had brought to my life. Ever since that time I have been living with more anonymous letters calling me a "stinking Muslim" and a "stinking foreigner", showing the clear equating in the popular mentality of Islam and foreign-ness. I still get letters implying that I have somehow defected and informing me that defectors are being shot. People offer to come to my apartment and beat me up. Unfortunately these threats are not extraordinary in Germany. Even non-Muslims receive them if they speak publicly in support of Muslims' rights. For example, priests and mayors who have come out in favor of building mosques in their towns also receive death threats. Again, the reaction is against what is considered exotic or foreign and therefore inimical to an assumed essentially Christian ethnic identity.

For a time the federal headquarters of the CDU defended my right to choose my religion and welcomed my public statements as proof for the liberal attitude of the party. But after a change in the administration of the party, my situation worsened. Thus, when the publication of my book *Zwischen allen Stühlen: Ein Deutscher wird Muslim* (Between the Stools: - A German Becomes Muslim, Bonn 1995) was announced in the spring of 1995, I was told that if I made any more statements without authorization from the party, I would lose my job. When I duly sought permission to give two public lectures on Islam and was denied, I decided it was time to find another position. I then joined a public relations consulting firm in the private sector.

Of course, I am not the only German Muslim with problems like these: Murad Hofmann is the former German ambassador to Algeria and Morocco. During his tenure in the latter post he announced his second book about certain aspects of the Shari'a (the Islamic legal system) and

was then fiercely attacked in the German media. A woman member of the federal parliament demanded that the foreign minister recall Hofmann from his post because Germany, in her opinion, should not be represented by “a medieval macho Muslim.” Later, when it was pointed out that the book was not yet on the market when she had made the statement, she admitted that she had not even looked at the book. Her action, clearly, was not to the contents of the book but to the mere fact that a German was somehow associating with the despised foreigners.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

These threats to German Muslims are, however, in no way comparable to the real violence committed against immigrant Muslims in recent years. On several occasions in different areas of Germany people have been beaten and killed because they have come here asking for asylum or because they were praying in a way that seemed strange to the ethnic German Christian. The cities of Mölln, Rostock, Hoyerswerda and Solingen – where, in the most horrible incident of all, most of the members of a Turkish family were burnt to death – serve as reminders that the violent society which we thought belonged to the past is still a reality in Germany.

To a certain extent, of course, these fierce reactions can be explained. For one thing, some Germans feel those who reject their inherited religious tradition are traitors somehow. More importantly, the existence of Muslims of ethnic German origin also deprives the opponents of Islam of their basic argument: that Islam is foreign to Germany. It is easy to avoid dealing with the message of Islam when you are culturally distinct from its adherents. Differences in language and eating habits, it seems, act as a buffer between ethnic Germans and immigrant Muslims, allowing the former to maintain their conviction that Islam does not belong on German soil. But there are no such shields when these people confront Muslims who are ethnic Germans. Finally, German Muslims know their rights as citizens. They know the political

framework and how to work within it to demand their rights. It is to be expected that they are much more determined to fight for their rights and enter the political field. Perhaps this appears to xenophobic Germans as a far more dangerous threat even than the “foreigners” for, in fact, joining the political fray is just what German Muslims have begun to do.

GETTING ORGANIZED

With the arrival of the families of the guest workers it became apparent that Muslims were going to stay. Thus, they needed not only housing but access to schools for their children. They also demanded regulations to enable them to slaughter their animals in accordance with Islamic rules, they wanted to build prayer rooms, and they wanted to bury their dead in a proper Islamic way.

But even with a Muslim population of 2,2 million, only one third of an overall population of 6 million foreigners living and working in Germany, it still remains easy for public opinion and politicians to ignore most of the needs of Muslims in Germany. This is because as foreigners they have not yet formed a voting constituency. Even if the Muslims are successful economically, as employees or self-employed, and even if their children leave university with excellent marks, they remain more isolated than other foreigners who come from Christian backgrounds, for example. The religious difference is sufficient to keep them “other”.

Furthermore, despite the prejudices of Christian Germans, the Muslim community in Germany is not monolithic. It reflects the tremendous diversity in the Muslim world overall. If today, for example, you want to go to a mosque in Germany’s former capital city of Bonn (population 300.000), you have a choice. You can go to the Moroccan *salle de priere*, to the Turkish mosque that used to be a carpenter’s shop, to the former supermarket which is now the Afghani mosque, to another Moroccan mosque which was a car repair shop, or to the new

Bosnian mosque, a former business office. Since the opening of the Saudi-financed King Fahd Academy, you can also go to the mosque proper which was built as part of the academy.

Organization of such a diverse community is difficult since immigrants of the different nationalities tend to stick together. Not only in Bonn but throughout Germany they have their own communities and clubs based on the culture of the countries they come from - even if this behavior is actually considered "un-Islamic". Cooperation among the various Muslim ethnic communities tends to be more evident in agreement on foreign policy issues than in intra-Muslim cooperation even within a single city. It was only three years ago, for example, that in the city of Mannheim all Islamic communities got organized and instituted an annual "Islam week" with very impressive lectures, open houses in mosques, and other cultural events. The majority of Muslims, however, still tend to socialize primarily among their ethnic communities. In other words, Muslims have made it very difficult for themselves to be accepted as partners in negotiations in the political life of Germany because their would-be German interlocutors simply can question whether any one group actually speaks with authority for the entire community, in order to shy away from dialogue.

Yet organization of the German Muslim community, essential for integration into German society overall, has proceeded apace. What then were the first steps toward gaining political integration and, closely related to it, religious acceptance for Muslims? The structure of political administration in Germany works on three levels: city councils, governments of the states (*Länder*), and the federal level. It was on the city level where the first steps toward organization and integration were taken. Muslims of the first generation, having gained their basic German language skills, managed to turn old supermarkets and factories into places for prayer. They also managed to arrange for those who could not be shipped back home for burial to be buried in an Islamic way in Germany.

Developing Islamic schools was more difficult, because education is in the political sphere of the states. Organization at this level requires far more organizational skill. It took almost thirty years and the growing up of what is called the “third generation” of Muslims, born in Germany and speaking German as their mother tongue, for organization of Muslims in Germany to be effective on this and the national level. By the early 1990s, the annual meeting of “German speaking Muslims” which brings together Muslims of all different nationalities living in Germany, had become the nucleus of state and national organization. Indeed, it is now so large that the organization holds two conferences annually in each of the major states, and one large national conference. At these conferences experiences are exchanged, strategies are discussed, and, of course, cultural events are celebrated.

Such events have been effective in developing a national German Muslim consciousness and building networks among disparate communities. Phone calls, letters, and faxes have helped consolidate the German Muslims, as have personal visits. We have traveled from north to south, to show solidarity, to give advice, or just to sit and pray together. Thus, a new quality of togetherness has begun to develop among German Muslims.

The efforts to create a unified Muslim movement have resulted in the creation of three organizations on the national level: *Islamrat für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und West-Berlin* (Council of Islam for the Federal Republic of Germany and West-Berlin; “and West-Berlin” was dropped after reunification), the *Islamisches Konzil* (Islamic Council), and *Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland* (Central Council of Muslims in Germany).

The Council of Islam, actually founded in 1986 in Berlin, has for a long time been a quiet advocate of dialogue. Having been founded ahead of its time, it had to wait and grow to play a significant role. The Islamic Council is managed by the Muslim Student Union, it has strong contacts with foreign governments and donors. It works mainly in the academic field. In the spring of 1996, for example, it organized a small convention which instituted a working group

for the establishment of a German chapter of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, which was founded in the United States twenty-five years ago.

The real breakthrough in public life was the establishment of the Central Council for Muslims in Germany, a name adapted from the Central Council of Jews. It was created in November 1994 out of the former Committee for the Establishment of Islamic Slaughtering in Germany. The reason for its existence is directly linked to the structure of the German federal government. In order to be registered as an official lobbyist on the federal level, you have to be an incorporated association or society (*Verein*). In order to get this registration – that is, to play by the German rules - the committee decided to become incorporated. It is truly a national organization. Its chairperson, Dr. Nadeem Elyas, is a physician from Saudi Arabia. The vice-chair people are German and Turkish, the secretary general a Turkish Muslim, and the treasurer is a German Muslim. Furthermore, with statements about the rules for Islamic burials which were distributed nationwide, and with the initiative for Islamic religious instruction in German schools in the German language, the committee has gained nationwide publicity and indications are that it is an accepted partner in dialogue today. In the summer of 1995, Dr. Elyas was the first “official” Muslim to be invited to a hearing in the Federal Parliament about organ transplantation. The most significant event on the way toward political recognition, however, was the invitation to the Central Council by President Roman Herzog to his residence in Berlin in December 1995. This was the first time a German President spoke officially to Muslims.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE INDICATIONS

These first, small steps towards influence differ greatly from what seems to be happening in France and England. In Germany there has been no tendency to form an Islamic party or parliament, as in Britain. The young third generation Muslims want to join and, in fact, are joining the existing political parties. There are, of course, many debates about whether it is

Islamic to be involved in organization with “unbelievers”, but the majority of German Muslims seems to have made the decision to work and live with and inside the German society.³ And even with unemployment high, there is nowhere near the air of desolation and despair among German Muslims that we hear exists among Muslims in France. The trust in the German economy to speed up again and produce jobs is still there, as is the desire and ability to find a place in the German society by working within the political process.

What is going to happen in the future is, of course, only a matter of speculation, and a positive and peaceful outcome is by no means guaranteed. I have mentioned the positive signs, but there are also some barriers against the integration of Islam into German society which must also be mentioned.

First, Germany like other nations of the West, is supposed to be secularized and a country where the ideals of Enlightenment are deeply rooted. However, if you look closely, this is not quite accurate. It is true that the churches have no official say in German politics. But the state does collect tax from the Christians and distributes it to the churches. The churches are officially recognized as “corporations by public law”, and as such their representatives sit on the boards of the broadcasting corporations as well as in the meetings of the (state) ministries of education, deciding religious curricula in schools where it seems only natural that Christian religious instruction is given. Indeed, the major political force in Germany, the party that has ruled the country since 1982, calls itself Christian Democratic Union, implying that it derives its program from the roots of Christian ideology. Therefore, in spite of secular ideology, there is undeniably a public Christian presence in Germany. Nevertheless, in fairness, it has to be noted that it was the churches that first encouraged a culture of dialogue with the Muslims. Both major denominations have years ago appointed representatives whose only task it is to engage in the dialogue with Muslim communities!)

³ If one uses the categories often used to describe variations within Islamic ideologies - modernists, traditionalists, and tajdidists or “renewalists” – one will find all three represented in Germany. The modernists tend toward secularism, and the traditionalists tend toward an isolationist stance. But the tajdidists are a solid majority in Germany.)

Secondly, the frame of mind of the German population has been shaped by history books which reflect 1400 years of Christian history writing. While this is not always hostile to Islam, in many cases it is simply ignorant of Islam and, unfortunately, in some cases there is a distinct anti-Islamic bias. Iranian-born Professor Abdoljavad Falaturi, from the Islamic Academy in Cologne (which moved to Hamburg in February of 1996), spent years analyzing Islam in German textbooks. Slowly the texts are being changed, particularly due to honorable efforts like those of Sigrid Hunke in *Allah ist ganz anders: Enthüllung von 1001 Vorurteilen über die Araber* ("God is Completely Other: The Dismantling of 1001 Prejudices About the Arabs; Bad König, 1990) It is perhaps not surprising that Charles Martell, who stopped the Muslims at Tours and Poitiers in 732 c. e., is still described as a hero, as is Prinz Eugen who defeated the Turks before Vienna in 1453. The spirit of the Crusades, however, is still evident and seems to stand in the way of appreciation of the contributions of Islam to world history, such as the fact that the cohabitation of the three Abrahamic faiths under Islamic rule in Andalus (Spain) produced an unprecedented high culture. Similarly, that Goethe's poetry would not be what it is without his knowledge of Arab-Islamic culture and religion, for example, or that Lessing wrote the play "Nathan der Weise" a play about the closeness of the three Abrahamic religions, and that Rückert was motivated to attempt a German translation of the meaning of the Qur'an, seems to be quite overlooked in German higher education.

Finally, German Muslims face the same challenge that confronts Muslims everywhere: that all Muslims are made to be responsible by the media for everything any single Muslim does at any place in the world in the name of Islam. We all know that the *ummah* is the community of all Muslims and that it does not allow borders or nationalities to divide it. And we all know that it was the English and the French who divided their colonial possessions and thereby separated the Muslim world into different countries. Nevertheless, Muslims worldwide should not be held responsible for the actions of a few. Still, there is a strong tendency in Germany for the actions

of some Muslims to be taken as representative of all Muslims' views. Thus, it becomes very difficult, particularly after the Gulf War, to convince people that Islam is a message of peace.

This last phenomenon may be the most unexpected to citizens of the West who pronounce the shahada: We were brought up in the spirit of Enlightenment and we exercised what we believed is our religious freedom. Yet suddenly we find ourselves in a situation, where our former reject us, telling us we have turned our backs on Enlightenment principles. They believe we have joined a tradition that discriminates against women and rejects democratic values. These people, it seems, have turned Enlightenment principles, democracy, and human rights into a new kind of absolutist and intolerant religion. Many are not even willing to engage in dialogue. When they hear of the many structural analogies and shared values Islam and Christianity, they dismiss it as propaganda. It is this intolerance that I find most disappointing. I feel that I have discovered an ironic twist in Enlightenment which I call the trap of Enlightenment. Having exercised my religious freedom I expected to find tolerance but instead have found animosity and hostility, even from those who consider themselves the most enlightened.

To cut through these layers of public prejudice and misinformation is the first prerequisite to a wider acceptance of Islam in Germany. German Muslim - of German ethnicity and otherwise - are now cooperating in this endeavor. Those who grew up in Islam share their knowledge of the tradition with their sisters and brothers, and those who grew up in Western culture push the process of political integration. They understand both the political system which is the key to integration and the prejudices that stand in their way.

However, working for acceptance in everyday life and in the political community is only one aspect of the struggle for integration. Of equal importance is the conflict for ideological hegemony being waged internationally. On the one hand is the school of those who, like German author Sigrid Hunke, speak of three heritages of Europe: the Judaic, the Christian,

and the Arab-Islamic. On the other are those who, like Harvard University's Samuel Huntington, speak of the inevitable cultural clash between Islamic and Western civilization.⁴ Huntington's theory, of course, has no foundation in European culture, as was demonstrated recently when he was invited by the prestigious Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Bonn. After his lecture he was confronted by a group of silver-haired former German diplomats who respectfully pointed out to him that he had no understanding of the cultural fabric of Europe, which incorporates "many beautiful and important threads of Islam." But I think European Muslims have an important role to play in this debate. We are in a unique position to be able to demonstrate that Europe – and with it, Western civilization as a whole – would be scarcely what it is today without the Arab-Islamic heritage. From its role in the development and transmission to Europe of philosophy, mathematics, and science to the very institution of the university, the Islamic world is an integral part of what is now recognized as Western civilization. General acceptance of these facts will not only change the outlook of the Europeans toward their own culture, but will allow Muslims to feel that Western culture is not an alien and hostile phenomenon. This new attitude would characterize a Europe in which those who choose to may feel at home and with which those on the other side of the Mediterranean can communicate as cultural equals. The Mediterranean Sea would cease to be a border between an essentially Christian Europe and the non-Christian world, and become simply a sea connecting the North and the South. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl envisioned this possibility in his speech to greet Pope John Paul II in front of the Brandenburg Gate in the spring of 1996: He spoke for the union of all Christians: Catholics, Protestants, and the Orthodox. But he went on to encourage greater understanding of the shared heritage of the three Abrahamic faiths: the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. If this sentiment takes root and grows, the Muslim minority in Germany might have a future after all.

Further Reading:

⁴ See Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3 (Summer 1993): 22-44.

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